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THE BABY'S GRANDMOTHER

“She whom I have praised so,
Yields delight for reason too :
Who could doat on thing so common
As mere outward-handsome woman ?
Such half-beauties only win
Fools, to let affection in.”

—WITHER.

THE
BABY'S GRANDMOTHER

BY

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AUTHOR OF 'TROUBLESOME DAUGHTERS,' 'MR SMITH: A PART
OF HIS LIFE,' 'PAULINE,' 'COUSINS,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

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THE BABY'S GRANDMOTHER.

CHAPTER XVI.

MATILDA WOULD HAVE PROVOKED A SAINT.

“ Must then your faithful swain expire,
And not one look obtain,
Which he, to soothe his fond desire,
Might pleasingly obtain ?
(Phyllis, without frown or smile,
Sat and knotted all the while.)”

—SEDLEY.

As to declining, it was not to be thought of. Without hesitation every objection was disposed of as it appeared. They had dined, certainly they had dined, and dined most plentifully in the middle of the day, and one o'clock was quite the correct hour for Sunday in the country no doubt. He wished for no

more dinner, assuredly for no more *dinner*; but if Lord Overton were good enough to desire their *company*, that was another thing. And then how very glad, how devoutly thankful Mrs Hanwell would be to be rid of them for a little longer; it would be quite a charity, quite a Sunday deed, to take two such malcontents off the poor lady's hands. And as to the dark night? It was already dark, it would be no darker four hours hence; and as he spoke he fixed his bright black penetrating eyes keenly, and amorously, and exultingly on Lady Matilda. That look undid him; she wondered how she could ever have found Mr Whewell agreeable, even tolerably agreeable; and in the revulsion that had now set in, was almost ready to hope that she would never set eyes upon him again.

Never, at least, would she meet his.

On his part, Whewell fancied that his present alacrity and persistency was setting to rights whatever had been wrong before, and that, supposing Lady Matilda had (as was likely

enough in spite of her making-believe to the contrary), been piqued by his neglect on the previous day, she should now see that neither Robert's obstinacy nor anything else should force him from her side. He would shirk no discomforts for her sake; and since she had even gone out of her way to make her brother give the invitation instead of doing it herself, she should lose nothing by her modest coyness.

He stayed alone. Robert, true to himself and Lotta, could not be persuaded, and at length, rather to his amazement and much to his discomfiture, found himself trudging back through mud and mire, companionless, both his cherished guests left behind, both deserters, both irreclaimable. His suggestion that Challoner should now renew his visit to Endhill had been scouted by Teddy, and even met by something like warmth on the part of Lord Overton. "Go? nonsense!" the latter had exclaimed. "We like your friend Challoner, and he seems to like us, and as we don't see

many people, you have done us a good turn in bringing him here. He is going to stop on a bit, and as soon as his hand gets all right he can shoot. There is nothing to take him away." And with this his nephew had been obliged to be content.

He had no reason to complain; that Challoner and Whewell had each been in his way a success was doubtless gratifying: but still there was something in Challoner's looking so much at home, so calm and still and imperturbable and comfortable in the corner of the big sofa by the fire, so entirely as if he were *their* man—Matilda's, Overton's, and Teddy's—that, considering none of them had ever seen him ten days before, and that it was not to visit *them* but *him*, and to be godfather to *his* baby, that Challoner had come, there was something in all this, in the baby's having fallen so completely into the background, and in the present oblivion of all that had been so prominent before, that seemed to turn the whole affair topsy-turvy.

From the very beginning things had worked oddly,—he would not say even to himself amiss, but oddly, incongruously. First had been the hasty and ill-timed appearance of the brother and sister at Endhill, then Lady Matilda's absurd preference for Whewell over Challoner, then Challoner's unfortunate accident, and finally, Whewell's protracted stay. Now here they were both at Overton, both enthroned at Overton, able to do without him at Overton, in clover, and clover which he had not provided, at Overton; and here was he, neither sharing the welcome nor the good cheer to which he had been the stepping-stone, suffered to depart hungry and cheerless, and with the chance of being wet through, on his weary and solitary homeward way.

It was hard on Robert, but perhaps Whewell had not a very much better time of it in the Overton drawing-room.

He did not know how it was that he did not get on better: Matilda neither shunned him nor frowned on him, and yet he seemed

to lose ground with her every hour. With her brother also: Lord Overton had never been jovial, but now he passed the wine with scarcely a remark, while Teddy only seemed to brighten at all when he again volunteered the useful T-cârt.

Certainly the thing—he knew what he meant—the thing was not to be done this time; he should have to come again—to come as soon as he could, and with the best face he could; and with this conviction he must give all his attention now to concealing his disappointment and keeping up appearances to the last. It was no easy task, and took all his tactics. He said to himself that Matilda would have provoked a saint, and that he was no saint, and that she ought to have known it; but it did not occur to him that she did know it, and that the winning manner, the instantaneous turning to him when he took a seat near, the hoping that he would have better sport another time—that next autumn, if he were down in the neigh-

bourhood, the birds would be more plentiful, —good heavens ! next autumn, to a man who wished to come down next week !—that all of this, which was just what he did not want, and could have done without, was a woman's defensive armour donned on purpose. More and more gloomy grew his brow, and more and more sweet and gracious and queenlike grew her smile.

She saw that she was doing it nicely.

She could not have done it more nicely. He was biting his lip with vexation at the last ; and yet he feared and hated the parting hour. It seemed as if, did he let her go now, he should never get near Matilda again.

It was a wild night, and scarce a star was visible in the perturbed and disordered heavens. “We shall get along famously,” said Teddy. “The roads will be as soft as butter after all this rain. I can take you round by the downs if you like, only we might find a tree or two down across our way ;

perhaps we had better not. Are you ready, for the mare is a bad one to stand?"

Whewell was ready. That was to say, he had said his "Good-bye," and had failed in saying more; he had received no future invitation; he had elicited no regret; and he had had to feel a cheerful shake of his hand when he had meant to impart a doleful pressure. Matilda's whole aspect throughout the evening had been cruelly, uncompromisingly brisk—brisk was the only word for it. She had not cut him off from any farewell speeches, she had been pleased to acknowledge his suitable gratitude with a suitable rejoinder, and she had walked with him to the door of the anteroom, to hope this and that and be sorry for the other, but she had not uttered one word he had cared to hear; and his last vision, as he went his way, was of Challoner—the erewhile luckless despised Challoner—standing on the hearthrug, as it seemed in full possession of the hearthrug, with Lord Overton by his side, and with Lord Overton's hand

lying on his shoulder. Do what he could, he could not shake off that remembrance.

A week went by, and Challoner was still at Overton; a fortnight, and Challoner was still at Overton.

“And no word of his going,” said Robert Hanwell to his wife. “Of course we cannot have him now: it is out of the question, with all the workmen about, and this visit to my father’s pending besides. But they will not hear of his leaving the Hall. ’Pon my word, it looks so peculiar, considering the circumstances, that I—I——” He hardly knew how to take it, in short. He half liked it, and half not. It was such an odd thing to do, as he had said before,—so odd and unconventional and unlike other people, and like, oh so like Lotta’s people,—that it could not be quite right, and yet it was not easy to see wherein it was wrong.

Every time he met Teddy, to his “Challoner still with you?” Teddy would be quite surprised.

With them? Of course he was with them. What should he go away for?

Lady Matilda, more communicative, would comment on her brothers' predilection for the stranger, and on their absolute refusal to let his stay come to an end.

"He will be like the good divine—I forget who it was—who went to his friends for a night and remained with them for thirty years," she cried. "Thirty years hence will see Mr Challoner still at Overton, still longing to go, and still unable to give any reason for going. That is what goes on now. Teddy will not be satisfied without the reason, and Mr Challoner can find none. Now that he has left the army he has nothing to do, so then Teddy will have it out, 'Why?' and as there is no 'why' forthcoming, stay he must. Overton says it is the sharpest thing our Teddy ever did."

"And do you like it?" queried Lotta. She would not have liked it herself; but then, as she reflected, mamma never had taken any part in the housekeeping, so possibly she did not

mind that shilly-shallying hanging on from day to day which would have been a great trouble to most housekeepers. To be sure, housekeeping at Overton was not the same as at Endhill. All the same, mamma was not fond of visitors staying in the house for any length of time, uncle Edward being so peculiar, and uncle Overton such a recluse.

Lady Matilda, however, protested that she did not in this instance object. Mr Challoner was a good guest, and her brothers liked him, —and then she talked rather quickly of other things.

By degrees she said less and less of Mr Challoner. She was not much at the cottage at this time. She had a cold, a headache, engagements, one thing and the other to prevent her; and in particular, she had taken to walking instead of riding.

“I met Lady Matilda walking with Mr Challoner along the downs to-day,” announced Robert once.

Lady Matilda had turned out of her way to

stop him, and had called to him gaily, and greeted him affectionately; inquiries had been made after her daughter, and kisses sent to her grandson; and she had further been careful to explain how her poor horse had hurt his foot, and so her poor Teddy had had to ride alone, and she and Mr Challoner had been forced to come out for a walk.

Her poor Teddy had had to ride alone for some days, and Mr Challoner and Matilda had been out walking on each of these; but this did not transpire on the occasion of meeting Robert. "It was so dull and disconsolate in the house," she had added demurely.

She had not looked particularly dull and disconsolate: the sea-wind, or something else, had brought a rich warm colour to her cheek, and her eyes had looked full and soft, and her warm plaid shawl had been snugly wrapped round her shoulders, and her dark hat had become her, and altogether she had had a bright and rosy and pleasant appearance; and had she not taken pains to be pleasant to *him*,

Robert might have disapproved all this, and felt that it was even more to be deprecated and regretted than usual. But Matilda had smiled on him that smile that no mortal man could resist—and he so seldom had it, poor fellow!—and she had slipped her hand so confidently within his arm, and stepped along so willingly by his side, and had made him altogether so entirely one of the party, that he had quite apologised when he had had to leave them, and had felt almost rude in letting them turn to walk back to Overton alone.

But then it had been getting on to five o'clock, and Lady Matilda having Mr Challoner to take care of her, with such an escort could not really have needed any other. He had not been required—but he had been hushed and stroked down—and the result was that to Lotta's "Mamma and Mr Challoner!" he replied with an explanation that was almost more than an apology; it amounted to an eulogium.

"I must own I was surprised," he said; "it was really too kind of Lady Matilda. To be

taken out by Lady Matilda herself is a compliment Challoner must certainly feel; and after the coolness with which, I am bound to confess, she treated him at the first, he will appreciate it the more. Challoner is not a man upon whom any attention is thrown away; and to do your mother justice, Lotta,—excuse my speaking frankly, my dear; but really your mother is so very peculiar and unreliable—one never knows what she will do, in short,—I own I had hardly expected such an open display of her change of mind.”

“Oh, mamma flies round like a weather-cock,” replied Lotta, somewhat tartly. “You need never be surprised at anything mamma does; and she will say one thing one minute and another the next. For instance yesterday,—what do you think she said about cook yesterday? I told her that we had begun to suspect now that cook had had a hand in Sarah’s leaving, and she stopped me at once, before I had even begun to explain what made us think so, with ‘Well, my dear, dismiss her’

—you know that quick way mamma has,—
‘Well, my dear, dismiss her,’ she said, as if it were nothing to dismiss a woman like cook. I would not on any account dismiss her unless I had good grounds, really good grounds, for doing so; so when I tried to explain this to mamma,—I was trying to show that we had no direct *proofs*, and could not be absolutely *certain* at present, when she cried out, ‘Well, my dear, don’t dismiss her,’—all in a minute, after she had said ‘Dismiss her’ two seconds before! And she would not let me utter another word,” continued Lotta, whom no one else than Lady Matilda ever contrived to stop. “She actually put her fingers in her ears and laughed at me; then she began playing cup and ball by herself till Mr Challoner came in.”

“Oh, Challoner was here at the same time she was yesterday?”

“Why, of course he was, Robert—I told you so; but he would not sit down. He came in on his way from the woods; he had been shooting, and called here on his way back.

It was scarcely on his way either, but he had evidently wished to call—and you know he did owe us a call;—but then, when he found mamma here, he was obliged to cut his stay short, as it was getting late, and mamma could not walk home at his pace, he said; otherwise he would have waited to see you; for I told him that you had only gone out to the workmen, and would be in again directly. However, he would not let me send, as he was afraid it would be dark before they got home, if he did. It was a pity that mamma was here.”

“Certainly—yes. Still, I am glad Lady Matilda had the opportunity of seeing for herself the sort of person Challoner is; probably she had never before had him alone,” (how little Robert knew!) “and no doubt it was their meeting here yesterday that induced her to show him the cliffs to-day. He had never seen the high cliff before, and your mother had undertaken to show it him. It was extremely polite of Lady Matilda; and she took great

pains to signal to me to join them, I assure you. She was waving and calling to me for some time before I discovered who it was. I saw two figures, but never dreamed of its being your mother and Challoner; and they might have passed me quite well had they wished to do so, but they were determined to make me go along with them. They would not let me off. Really I had not been going their way, but I could not refuse when your mother set upon me; and though it may have partly been that she was tired of Challoner, still I don't know; they seemed on excellent terms, and there was nothing rude to him in what Lady Matilda said; she walked between us and took my arm. Well, of course it was natural that she should have more to say to me than to one who is not a member of the family; and I must say this—I always have said it—that no one can make herself more agreeable than Lady Matilda when she chooses—she really could not have been pleasanter than she was this afternoon."

“ Oh, mamma can be pleasant enough ”— but before the young lady could get her tongue in, he was proceeding in his own ponderous periods,—“ We had a most sociable walk ; and though Challoner did not take much part in the conversation—he is a silent fellow at the best of times—he and Lady Matilda seemed quite to understand each other : he carried her shawl, for she had brought a shawl to spread on the rocks where she sits down.”

“ Sits down ! What a foolish thing to do ! ”

“ Certainly, quite so ; very foolish, no doubt. I would not sit out on a day like this myself ; but your mother is very strong, and not apt to take cold, I fancy. I recommended them to the best place. They would be quite sheltered in the spot I selected ; and after walking from the Hall to the high cliff, Lady Matilda would really require a rest. She owned to being a little tired, which she seldom does. That was why they stopped at the cliff, and did not come on here ; and besides, the roads are in such a

shameful state, as Lady Matilda said—quite unfit for ladies.”

“Mamma never minds that.”

“Quite so; I thought she never did. I was glad to hear her allow as much, for Lady Matilda is far too venturesome as a rule.”

“She should never have been out to-day.”

“Oh, indeed it was a far better day than you have the least idea of, my love. Sitting indoors listening to the wind gave you no notion of what a fine soft air it really was. A turn in the garden, with a wrap round your head, would have done you all the good in the world. I assure you I quite regretted that I had not suggested it to you. It really seemed quite selfish to have all the enjoyment myself, for it certainly was extremely enjoyable: as Lady Matilda said, the sea in itself was a sight worth braving the chance of a ducking for. Well, I did not altogether agree to that; but no doubt when we got up to the furze common, and saw round the east point where the rocks jut out, it was very fine, uncommonly

fine. As Lady Matilda said, we have had nothing as fine this year; Lady Matilda has undoubtedly an eye for the picturesque in nature, and Challoner——”

——“Well, I must say,” burst forth Lotta, finding at length something on which an indefinite gathering annoyance could wreak itself —“I must say that I do wonder at you, Robert: you seem to be quite pleased that mamma and Mr Challoner should be wandering about the country all alone by themselves. You who are so very particular about these things, how would you have liked *me* to be seen miles from home, all by myself, with a young man? What would you have said if I had set off with Mr Whewell, or—or any one else, to visit the high cliff, and walk along those lonely downs, where you may walk for hours and never come across a living soul? I would not have done such a thing for the world. If I had ever *wished* to do it—and I never should have wished, I am sure—you would have been the very *last* person to have

encouraged me; you would have been quite shocked. You——”

——“My dear!” gasped he.

“And yet, just because you were taking part in it yourself——”

——“My dear Lotta”——but Robert was for perhaps the first time in his life fairly at a loss. It was quite true that it *was* because he had been taking part in it himself—that because he had been freshened by a pleasant walk in pleasant company, and had been unwittingly cajoled into benevolence, he was thus lenient and amiable; and could he deny it? “I—I—really,” he exclaimed. “Really,” beginning to recover himself, “you take a very incorrect, and, I must add, prejudiced view of the case.”

“Prejudiced! Well, I don’t see how that can be,” rejoined the young lady, pursuing her advantage. “Considering that it is only your own account I have to go by, if I am prejudiced, it is likely to be on your side,” which had a distinct element of truth in it, and scored

indubitably a point for Charlotte. "Your own version of what took place is the only one I have heard ; so if I do not look upon it in the same light as you do, I cannot see how it is that I can be prejudiced on the other side. All I say is, how would you like people to see me going about like that ? Should you approve if I were to do as mamma does ?"

"Certainly not," replied Robert, promptly ; "but, my dear, you mistake the case. Your mother is—is placed in a peculiar position, living as she does with your uncles, and they being—at least your uncle Overton being so solitary in his habits——"

——"There is always uncle Edward."

"Your uncle Edward was otherwise engaged to-day. Lady Matilda took particular pains to explain this to me. I fancy she thought I might feel a passing surprise at meeting her and Mr Challoner out by themselves, but I did not at all—not in the slightest. I saw at once how it was ; Challoner could hardly have been sent out alone——"

“Why not?”

“Impossible, my love; it would have been most impolite—discourteous, I should say.”

“Then he could have ridden with uncle Edward.”

“You may take my word for it that there was a sufficient reason for his not doing so. I forget what it was, but of this I am confident, that Lady Matilda explained it entirely to my satisfaction; and as for there being anything improper in Lady Matilda’s escorting Chalonier herself, if *that* is what you insinuate, my dear,”—(Richard was now himself, every inch himself again, and could have felled to the earth a dozen Lottas with his fiats, had they lifted up their voices against his)—“really, ahem! I am amazed that so extremely absurd and unsuitable an idea should have entered your head. I confess I should never have anticipated such an objection. As if any lady of your mother’s age and standing could not be trusted to walk alone with a gentleman without remarks being made! Remember this

my love, that it is not in the thing itself; it is in its being a cause for remark that the real objection lies. I could trust you with any one, Lotta, of course; but it would be highly indiscreet in either of us to run the risk of people gossiping; but," raising his voice, "but—I know perfectly what you would say, my dear—one moment—allow me," with his hand in the air, "you and your mother are two very different people: you are eighteen, and Lady Matilda is thirty-seven. Thirty-seven: ahem! If that is not answer enough for you, it is for me. I have my own ideas; and I must say—you must permit me to say it, my love—that I never before had my ideas on the matter of impropriety called in question."

So saying, he closed the debate, and stalked from the room master of the field.

CHAPTER XVII.

MOONLIT WAVES.

“The twilight is sad and cloudy,
The wind blows wild and free,
And like the wings of sea-birds
Flash the white caps of the sea.”

—LONGFELLOW.

“WHO is coming to see the waves to-night?” inquired Teddy that evening at dinner. “They were breaking over the lifeboat-house forty feet high last night, Spiers tells me, and half the town was out watching them. I wish we had been there; we ought to have been there; I felt such a fool not even to have known anything about it. How did we not know, Matilda? Somebody should have told us.”

“We did not see anybody to tell us, and we

did not think of it for ourselves," replied she ; "besides——" and she glanced at her elder brother.

"Well, I'm going to-night anyhow," said Teddy, in his "I've made up my mind" tone ; "I don't care who stays behind. Spiers says the tide will be full between ten and eleven, and they say it is going to be splendid. Spiers says the shopkeepers and people have been barricading their windows all day, for a lot of windows got smashed last night, and even right up the back streets the water poured into the cellars. Spiers says everybody was there ; it seemed so stupid for us not to be there."

"How is the sea so high?" inquired Chaloner. "Though there has been some wind, it has hardly amounted to anything of a gale."

"It's the time of year for it," said Teddy, lucidly. "I don't know why, but always about this time of year the sea goes mad ; and we ought to have known it," looking reproach-

fully at Matilda. "Why didn't the Applebys or some one tell us? They were there, I'll be bound."

"It is quite a sight then," said Challoner, and then he too looked at Lady Matilda, and she knew perfectly what his look as well as her brother's meant.

"If Overton likes," she murmured hesitatingly.

Now why should Matilda have hesitated; why did she not, as she would once have done, respond eagerly and joyously to the implied desire? A week ago and she would have been herself the one to propose just such an expedition; and yet now—now when the idea sends a thrill through her veins and a throb through her heart—she sits with downcast eyes and scarcely finds words for a response. Can it be that something has already passed between her and Challoner on the subject? Is he, perchance, not so absolutely ignorant on the subject as one would suppose? Teddy, at least, sees nothing of this, and is impatient

and alarmed ; he has already been done out of the sport—been absent when every one else was present the previous evening—and he is ready to protest and explode, indeed to defy authority altogether, if a voice is raised in opposition now. There is not in reality the slightest chance of any such voice being raised ; even Overton himself is rather disposed for the thing than not—it is a kind of adventure he can enjoy. Nobody puts him forward, or makes him of consequence, or worries him, or pesters him on this sort of occasion ; and accordingly—

“ I'll go if you like,” he said quite good-humouredly ; “ the night is fine enough——”

——“ Fine enough ! I should just say so, rather ;” cried his brother, his excitement rising to a height. “ Now, Matilda, you give in ; just you say no more, but get your things on and come along too ; when even Overton is going——”

——“ Oh, of course,” assented his sister very gently ; “ of course if you are—are all

inclined for it, I—I should like it very much. It will be a beautiful sight, and there will be plenty of others to keep us in countenance; and with such a moon we shan't come to grief among the hedges on our way to the town, and——”

“That's right; that's a good girl; I knew she would knock under in the long-run,” nodded Teddy, patronisingly. “Now do be quick over dinner, and let us get off by nine. I'll order the phaeton at nine. Now, Matilda, you won't keep us waiting; and, Challoner, mind it will be cold by the sea, and we may get a drenching as likely as not,—do take my topcoat; now *do*,” very earnestly. “I have dozens of coats, and——”

“Not one that Challoner could get into,” observed his brother, with his slow occasional smile. “You must have it let out half a yard or so first, Ted: Challoner has an uncommonly nice topcoat of his own too. If you get us all off by nine and don't forget your topcoat for yourself, my boy,” continued he, “that will be

two feats in one night. Have you ordered the phaeton yet?"

He had already forgotten to ring the bell, and the bustle attendant on this, and on giving the order, kept him happily engaged throughout the remainder of the meal.

Fain would he have had them all go in the T-cart; but as that was impossible, he could at least himself drive the phaeton, with Matilda beside him, and Overton and Challoner behind,—and so he announced that the four were to be arranged. It was his expedition, and he was allowed to do with them as he chose; and though he fancied that Challoner was stupid about something, and did not understand how cleverly they would all fit in when thus disposed of, he fancied that it was an inclination on Challoner's part to handle the reins himself which made him so unresponsive; and much as he liked Challoner, this was too much: he must always drive, whatever nasty things Matilda might insinuate about the hedges. As, however, nothing was said, all went well,

and luckily his peace of mind was undisturbed by overhearing an aside in the hall, when his sister was having her furs fastened.

"Are you at all nervous?" said Challoner, softly.

"Not to-night; I have told William what horse to give us, and we shall only have one. I think there is no fear."

"You would not like Lord Overton to drive, or—or me?"

"He would not like it." There was a very slight emphasis on the "he," but it was caught and understood. "It would put him out sadly: don't, please, don't say anything."

Nor did he further, but he sat well forward in the back seat, gazing on ahead with anxious, careful, protecting eyes, on along the narrow zigzag lanes, whose treacherous windings might produce anything at any moment; and somehow Matilda, as she sat just before him, was dimly conscious that there was an arm behind which would have been thrown around her at the first approach of danger.

The air was mild, and the vehemence of its fitful blasts had completely died away ere the party set out. Now there remained only a pleasant freshness, a clear bespangled sky overhead, and such soft wet roads as were delightful to traverse, when the mud only splashed the wheels of the phaeton and the glossy coat of the quiet old gig-horse. The very road-pools and ditches by the wayside were bright with moonlight, and reflected the chaise as it passed. All were comfortably tucked in, and the cigars of the gentlemen behind yielded only the faintest of fragrance to those before*—"Just what she likes," Overton answered for his sister, as he passed the match on to his companion.

Now and then it was of course absolutely necessary to ask if she did like it, to find out if she were warm and snug, to ascertain that she was not missing such and such a point in the landscape, and to this end Challoner must occasionally lean forward, and oblige her to turn her head and listen to his deep

voice sunk to an undertone; but for the most part of the way the phaeton rolled on amidst a cheerful contented silence—just such a silence as Lord Overton liked—and in little more than half an hour from the time of starting they entered the outskirts of Seaburgh.

Having for the latter portion of the way been obliged to make a considerable curve, and strike inland for a mile or so before approaching the coast again, it was not until phaeton and horse had been disposed of, and our party had hurried through some very shabby and dim back streets—not oversavoury back streets—streets that were redolent of tar, nets, stale fish, and all the concomitants of a small seaport,—it was not until these had been perforce threaded, that they began to experience some reward, or at least some apparent reward—some reward that could be taken hold of, for the exertions of the evening.

“Just you wait—just you wait,” had been

a frequent exhortation in the mouth of the self-constituted leader, as Teddy, with all the importance of a general, conducted his forces round corner after corner ; and truly it seemed worth the waiting for, when the great, rolling, booming breakers, which had been heard and felt and known to be near, and yet remained tantalisingly unseen for so long, at length fell at their feet.

As the authority Spiers had promised, all the world of Seaburgh was abroad to see the sight, some hurrying in one direction, some in another ; and the sea-walk being for the nonce impassable, the usually unpopular and shabby short cuts and back entrances were now in the ascendant. Everybody was glad of a shelter from the flying spray, which seemed to search out the deepest hollows so long as they faced the sea, and nobody could afford to despise the poorest and narrowest back alleys which enabled them to reach their destination.

It was from a long dark by-way that our

party at length emerged, to plunge no more into such, but to join the groups already assembled wherever an angle of the break-water afforded a dry footing, or even one partially so, whence they could enjoy the weird and beauteous spectacle. Even these prudent folks were not, however, destined altogether to escape the effects of their discreet temerity: every now and then there would be a cry and a run from venturesome boys making the most of the frolic; while the more sober-minded, who had no desire for an encounter, and would not have willingly run any risk, would provoke risibility in their neighbours by the early reluctance and the final haste of their ignominious retreat,—they would scarce hasten a step to begin with, and would scud like the wind in the end. The careful, sedate, reasoning man, in particular, would be a source of exultation to the thoughtless: he would calculate to a nicety the time likely to be taken in making his way across a dangerous spot, and would so

calculate as to take his time jauntily; he would wait until the moment after a heavy sea had swamped the pebbly road and retreated, at which happy moment was to be exhibited to the lookers-on the excellence of his forethought, by advancing before another of any size could approach; and he would have but gone a step or two when, lo! he was bespattered from head to foot, the victim of a pitiless shower, and all his wisdom would be seen to have been thrown away. There was no calculating upon the monsters; none could say how or when they would come.

All of this was, of course, fun to be rapturously appreciated by foolish Teddy Lessingham, who laughed till his sides were sore, and could not comprehend how it was that Matilda did not as usual respond to and share his ecstasies. Matilda hardly seemed to see what was going on; she was very quiet—curiously quiet; he could not get her to budge from a place she had chosen, whence nothing could be seen but the ocean itself—

a little obscure nook, where she and Challoner stood together, and which even Overton objected to ; and though with infinite pains he secured to her, and signed and beckoned her to come forward and take possession of, a more favoured standing-place close to the railing, and almost overhanging the water, she demurred so long that the opportunity was lost. The crowds jostled together and filled up the gap ; he had to retire and give up what it had cost him so much cunning and cleverness to obtain, while even then the ungrateful creature had hardly the grace to say, " Thank you."

No wonder he was indignant ; had it not been for the best joke in the world coming off at that moment, in the shape of the whole front row of spectators getting soused at once by a sily advancing wave, which, looking as innocent as a babe, took them all by surprise before they knew where they were—had it not been for this, causing him to stamp his feet and shout with the glee of the vilest little

urchin present, he would have given Matilda a piece of his mind. But by the time he got back to her, he had forgotten everything but mirth, and as she took his arm kindly and listened amiably, all was right between them. He could not, however, long be content to remain in the stupid place she had selected, and at length prevailed so far as to make her allow that there was yet more to be seen, and that perhaps it would be as well to see it. The "more" referred in especial to a bit of break-water a few streets to the right, where the principal attraction appeared to be, to judge by the people who flocked towards the point; and as Teddy must always go where others went, and see what they saw, he was soon restless to follow to the lifeboat-house. It was against the lifeboat-house that the fullest force of the waters fell.

Hard to move as Matilda had proved, she had to own on arriving at this spot that her troublesome brother had been right: nothing they had yet seen could equal what they now beheld.

It was indeed a spectacle never to be forgotten.

White in the brilliant moonlight, the raging sea could be seen to its horizon ; high into the cloudless heavens flew the fountains of foam. With a sweep and power resistless, yet with a grace ineffable and ease indescribable, with a rhythm mysterious yet precision accurate, wave after wave came on, the first exquisite burst succeeded by a back-swing and curve, and then a falling away to gather up once more, and break, and break, and break again—hither, thither, this way, that way—across, athwart, afar, at hand—twining, circling, winding, wreathing—in and out, up and down, until drunk into one another at last—no beginning, no end—none alone, each a part of the other.

As the tide rose, even the highest point of the lifeboat-tower was from time to time obscured, and the little knot of watchers who had pressed forward to the front had more than once to change their ground, as the

circling froth covered the space whereon they had at first stood.

Lord Overton and his party sought the shadow of a projecting gable, and still watched in silence; even admiration and exclamations died away—none cared to speak. At length, “I never saw anything like this before,” said Challoner’s voice behind Matilda—close, close behind her.

She did not bid him “hush,” as she might have done Whewell; she did not answer, nor turn, nor move away; she stood still, feeling that he was there, and that he had been there all the time,—that he had never yielded his place, and never meant to yield it, and that as they looked, so they felt—together.

Going home, he asked her to sit behind with him.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AND NOW IT WAS ALL OVER !

“ Alas ! silly fool that I was,”
 (Thus, sadly complaining, he cried),—
 “ When first I beheld that fair face,
 ’Twere better by far I had died.”

—ROWE.

Two hundred miles did the cruel train bear
 Challoner away from Overton at last.

Two hundred miles did that inhuman
 monster carry a reluctant wretched man ; and
 faster and faster it sped with him away from
 love, delight, enchantment,—and nearer and
 nearer it hurried him towards despair, deceit,
 and misery ;—further from where he would
 be, nearer to where he would not be ;—further
 from Eden, nearer to the wilderness.

He sat with his face backwards, emblematic-

cally. By instinct he had thrown himself into a seat which commanded the last view of the woods and uplands now so familiar, and to all time so dear,—and upon these he gazed as long as they remained in sight. They vanished, and still he looked on; he had nothing else, it seemed, to do. Newspapers, magazines, and the usual accompaniments of a traveller had been neglected or forgotten. He had nothing to read, nor did he want anything; he had the carriage to himself, but he hardly noticed that it was so; and there was a hot-water tin, but he did not put his feet on it; and cigars in his pocket, but he did not smoke them.

Hour after hour went by and found the solitary man still in the same position, still dead to all that passed, still with eyes turned absently, softly, and tenderly towards an unseen spot, which to memory and love was yet visible.

Of what really came and went Challoner beheld nothing.

Now and again an impatient movement, a frown or a sigh, would burst forth to betray that the day-dream which proved so overmastering had its moments of perturbation, its thorns among the rose-leaves ; now and again the dreamer would start forward, sit up, pull himself together with a passing expression of the lip and motion of the hand that seemed to betoken a commencement of something new, of a resolution and decision that had not been there before,—but ever as it rose would the momentary impulse fade away again, its cold unwelcome presence thrust out by some too powerful, too exquisite rival,—and Challoner, a willing slave to the latter, would once more sink back on the luxurious cushion, lost, revelling in musings that needed no effort, and that, alas ! were not to be dispelled by an effort. He was living the past month over again.

From first to last he had been a month at Overton. Excuses and arguments for thus prolonging an accidental stay, a mere deten-

tion for a single night, had been so acceptable both to himself and his hosts, that the continually postponed day of departure had almost seemed as though it never would come, never could really and actually arrive; and when at length it had, it had seen him depart, wellnigh in silence, and wellnigh mad with the wild longing for a reprieve in any shape and from any quarter.

Yet would he not reprieve himself; and the brothers had had to let him go, less concerned than he it is true, but still grudgingly, reluctantly, flatteringly, with many an injunction to "Come again,"—and what Lady Matilda had felt she had kept to herself.

And now it was all over, and he had only to look back upon it.

Never again must he cross that friendly threshold and hear that pleasant welcome; he had touched for the last time that fair hand, had met for the last time that dark eye, had heard a final farewell in that gentle voice. No sign had Matilda made; in no wise could

he or any other see that she had been expectant, or surprised, or grieved, or wounded,—and yet he felt, he felt he might have won her.

He might at any rate have tried his chance. He would not have been waved aside, smiled down, nipped in the bud and laid low in the dust as Whewell had been, and as he had himself seen Whewell be. Tush ! he had already gone farther, dared more and gained more, than Whewell had ever dreamed of. What of those wild sea walks over the moaning cliffs, up the lonely glen, along the unfrequented woodland paths ? Who saw the arm which held the slender form beneath the cliff on the brink of the foaming waterfall ? Whose presence marred the twilight hour in the dim old gallery ? For whom alone was the soft strain of music when the light was gone ? And there had been a day when her flowers had been worn by him, and her song had been sung for him,—when Overton had stopped short in his speech and held his breath as though struck all at once by a truth too strange for fancy,

and Teddy had flung himself out of the room, and had scarce been seen or spoken to for days after.

It had been Challoner, Challoner himself, the conscious cause of it all, who had brought back the penitent to Matilda's side eventually.

He had come on Challoner's arm, looking on Challoner as his friend, indebted to Challoner as the peacemaker—and Challoner had lain awake half the night afterwards. Not even the angrily affectionate beseechings of this brother had prevailed to make him stay on at Overton after this. With a letter which came in at breakfast in his hand, and with its urgency as his plea, he broke or tore aside the fetters which bound him at last, and told himself that he had broken them for ever.

He had got it over. That at first was Challoner's principal thought. He had done the thing properly, and had not made a fool of himself. They could see that he had been moved, as he ought to have been moved; that he had felt grateful, and nervous, and wretch-

ed, and had devoutly wished himself at the moment anywhere but where he was. So far, well. He had wrung Overton's hand, and muttered a something in Overton's ear of which it was impossible for any one to make out a syllable, and he had broken down—yes, actually and palpably broken down—in accepting a remembrance from Teddy. But this was all natural enough under the circumstances, while the supreme ordeal, the parting with Matilda, found him outwardly so calm that he caught himself wondering at himself, and unduly elated all too soon. The internal convulsion had come and gone unperceived, and he saw that he had lost nothing in his lady's eyes. Up to a certain point she had assuredly understood him—that is to say, she had seen that he must fly, though she knew not how good was the cause he had for doing so. She had probably taken it that he would not abuse the extraordinary kindness and confidence wherewith he had been treated, and that his modesty had told him he was already doing so in his

heart. He knew that he had pleased Matilda, as in truth he had pleased every woman he had ever cared to please. She had wanted no eager, assiduous, in-season and out-of-season prating lover. She had turned against the lively Whewell from the moment that "lover" appeared written on his brow, and had turned, as it happened, straight to Challoner; soon she had ceased to ask herself how or why, but had hung upon his words, and listened for his footstep, and fretted when he was absent, and shone out like a star when he was by. And of all this he had scarcely been ignorant; there had been moments when he had divined it all.

She must have known why he had gone, and she must have been proud of him for going as he did.

From one long reverie of mingled pain and pleasure, it seemed to Challoner that he was at length somewhat harshly aroused by familiar voices proceeding from familiar lips. The train had reached its destination—or rather our traveller's destination,—and he

was slowly and with a heavy heart stepping out of the carriage, when he became aware of a group of girls on the platform close to his elbow, and heard three tongues all together exclaim in the liveliest accents and almost in a breath, "What a pity we came !"

"Nonsense !"

"Here he is !"

Challoner shook hands with all three.

"Well, now that you have come, I shan't say any more," continued the last speaker, a tall fresh-coloured damsel with a bright handkerchief protruding from the front of her tight-fitting Newmarket. "As you are here, I shan't grudge our wait, though we have been here for an age or more, and have lost the best of the afternoon. Mary would have it we should be late. I knew we should not be late. Catch us ! We are always before the time for everything nowadays, between Mary and Emily. *You* are late, though, Jem ; how is that ?"

"Are we late ?" said Challoner, absently.

“The train is due at four, you know. Mary looked it out.”

“Oh, trains are never in to their time,” said Mary, “and it is all nonsense about our waiting; I did not mind waiting.”

“Oh, of course not: *she* did not mind waiting; that is a good one, I must say,” laughed her sister. “Do you hear that, Jem? That is for your benefit. Well, thank heaven, I retain my senses, whatever Mary and Emily may do. Emily was dying to go to cathedral this afternoon (we are turned so direfully devout nowadays, you must know, Jem); since Herbert came after Emily——”

“Do hush,” said Emily with a nudge; “how you do run on, Bertha! and can’t you see that Jem is not attending to you one little bit? He is wondering where his baggage is, are you not, Jem? What part was it put in? Where is the van? Back, or front?”

“Back, I think.”

He had no idea, but he had to say one or the other.

“ Well, if it is back, what do you go front for ? ” inquired Miss Emily, innocently.

She thought it very amusing, as did they all, to see the solitary portmanteau extracted, at length, from beneath the very seat whereon Challoner had been sitting, and to note how little he either knew or cared about it; she insisted on jumping into the carriage herself to see what else he had left behind, not being at all clear, she protested, whether an arm or a leg might not be found missing presently. And she searched, and inquired, and made merry over the subject, till his rueful smile faded away from sheer impatience, and the disgust of his soul was almost visible on his countenance. What had brought the girls there? He had never dreamed of their meeting him at the station, and at the best of times would have dispensed with the attention, while *to-day*——. They stood about enjoying themselves and the attention they attracted, and they put their little hands in their pockets, and stamped their smart little

feet, and shuddered and shook their shoulders, and all spoke at once, and rather too eagerly to their distinguished friend, their six-feet-two of straw-coloured Harris cloth ; and they were in the porters' way and the passengers' way, and jostled by one and another, and remarked upon by everybody—so that though no harm was done, and there was nothing actually reprehensible in the scene, it jarred terribly on a man who had been thinking for the last six or seven hours, nay, for the last three or four weeks, of a Lady Matilda. Lady Matilda, had she seen his present company, would have passed them by as though she saw them not ; but she would have thought—too well he knew what she would have thought : all at once it seemed to flash upon him as a revelation that Matilda was the very proudest woman he had ever known.

“ He's napping ! ”

“ He is not well.”

“ Boh ! ” cried the third close to his ear.

“ Behave, Bertha,” remonstrated both of

Bertha's sisters, tittering with their fingers before their mouths ; " behave, can't you, you bad girl !" continued Mary ; " don't you see people are looking ? Jem, do tell her."

Oh, if he could : if there had been any question of telling ; if he could only have ordered them off the platform, out of sight and out of hearing ! But no ; where they went, he must go : and though they might, and at length did lead the way, the victim had to follow, and to follow close behind. Had they been his sisters—but they were not his sisters ; and as the quartet march out of the station and up to the town—for it was agreed to walk rather than drive—we may, without farther mystery or circumlocution, inform our readers who and what were these new arrivals on the scene. They were the daughters of worthy William Tufnell, the principal banker of Clinkton, to which place Challoner had now come,—and one of the three was his betrothed bride.

Now Challoner had not found any par-

ticular fault with the eldest Miss Tufnell either in face, figure, or demeanour, when, a few months previously, it had been suggested by a careful elder sister that a wife for him might be found in the family of the wealthy banker. He had met Mary Tufnell at his sister's house. She was pretty, well dressed, and sprightly—perhaps over-sprightly; but being a grave man, whom chatter did not repel merely because it was chatter, he saw in the somewhat fatiguing flow of spirits which never failed, only the light-heartedness of extreme youth, and willing to be amiable, fell in with the notion of matrimony tolerably soon and tolerably easily. He was getting on in life, as Lady Fairleigh said. He would rather like to show his friends that he could do something yet, and something with a flavour of thirty thousand pounds, moreover: since Tufnell was known to be worth ninety thousand if he were worth a penny, and the three daughters who have already been introduced in this chapter, were his sole children and heirs.

Then Lady Fairleigh had been able to point out that homely as was their origin, there attached both respect and credit to the family; that no one ever had, or ever would have, a word to say against the match; that the proposed bride was barely twenty years of age, at which time of life she would soon unlearn all that it was desirable should be unlearnt—whereas with equal speed she might be counted upon to pick up all that it was requisite to know; that she appeared to be good-humoured, well educated, and adaptable,—in fine, that for a younger son, a son who had abandoned his profession, and had never had any prospects—for Jem Challoner, in short, her dear, good, kind, improvident brother Jem—nothing could be better than to offer his heart and hand with all convenient speed in such a convenient quarter.

Jem thought so to—with regard to the hand at least; as to the heart, he was over forty years of age, and supposed his falling-in-love days were over.

But he had a high opinion of Lady Fairleigh's judgment, and on this occasion it jumped with his own too entirely not to double its value. He would certainly act upon it, make hay while the sun shone, and take to his domestic hearth, if fortune favoured, the cheerful smiling lassie provided for him.

Was he to know that in her, as in himself, he had been grossly, terribly mistaken? Was he to tell that in her own home and among her own folks the Mary he knew, or thought he knew, would develop into another Mary, and a Mary that affrighted his inmost soul? Was he to suspect that the lively banter, necessarily kept in check at Lady Fairleigh's table and in Lady Fairleigh's drawing-room, would run riot in the unrestraint of home, and would resolve itself into chaff, chaff, chaff from morning till night? It was said of the Miss Tufnells that they would chaff a man till he did not know which was his head and which were his heels; but alas! Challoner found nothing to admire in the gift.

A great mistake had been made—a mistake which could never be unmade; and of one thing he was speedily convinced, that it could only be away from Clinkton, from her native place, with its native associations, surroundings, and dialect, that he could hope to regain any measure of the complacency with which he had at first regarded his *fiancée*. He stayed at Clinkton a week, and left without fixing the wedding-day.

But then, as Mary's mother observed, that was just like his thoughtfulness. He did not wish to hurry anybody, and he knew what a piece of work it would be when once it came to taking away from her and papa their Mary. And to be sure, Mary was young enough, and there was time enough, and she could not be thankful enough, nor think enough of Mr Jem for his consideration.

Such consideration even won upon the old banker himself. He had been both gruff and grumpy at the first demand for his daughter's hand; he had eyed Jem Challoner's letter—

for the thing had been done by letter—with mistrust, and had hummed and hawed, and not known very well whether to say “Yes” or “No.” But one thing and another, in particular, Mrs Tufnell’s anxiety to get her daughters married, or, as she phrased it, “off,” carried the day. A neighbour had got two daughters “off,” each at the age of eighteen, and this had caused even Tufnell’s broad bosom to share his wife’s chagrin after a fashion. So that what with the timely remembrance, and the knowing that he was now sued by a member of one of the oldest of the county families, and that the match, if agreed to, would at once lift him and his into the county set—the set just above his, the step just beyond him—it was impossible to be quite as independent and indifferent as he would have liked to appear.

Moreover, he knew about Jem, and knew that there were worse men. Supposing his girl were to set her heart upon a worse man—upon one of those silly, noisy, vapouring,

elbowing, ridiculous apes at the barracks, for instance ! There were plenty of them about ; and if he had not snapped his teeth at every single grinning face that grinned behind its hairy horns upon his doorsteps, the moustachioed gentlemen would have crept up the girls' sleeves, and carried them off by hook or by crook before now. He had had a time of it, since Mary and Emily grew up, that he had ; but he had kept the red-coats off somehow : they cut out of his way like greyhounds if he came across them nowadays.

But James Challoner was different, and in the end the banker gave Challoner a fairly cordial reply.

Then the two met, and the good impression deepened. Hitherto they had only occasionally seen each other, or a part of each other ; and Challoner had known that the burly pair of shoulders in front of him belonged to Tufnell the banker, and the banker had been aware that the hat which towered high above the other hats in the busy street pertained to old

Mr Challoner's youngest son—and that was all. Now, face to face, all went well.

All might have gone ill very easily. Had the suitor shown himself keen, or sharp, or pressing; had he, on the other hand, affected ignorance of Mr Tufnell's affairs, and declined to be enlightened; had he, in heroic mood, raved and protested—had he even talked of his Mary as “his,” he had undone all.

But by no such means had Challoner sought to strengthen his position. He had been perfectly moderate and truthful. He liked the young lady, and thought that they could be happy together; he should be glad to find that a marriage with her was likely to meet with the approval of both families. In almost as few words as these, the state of his mind had been set forth, and such laconic simplicity and straightforwardness had gone down wonderfully with an old gentleman who was ever on the look-out for artifice and exaggeration. At the end of their first interview, he had risen and held fast Challoner's hand. “You shall

have my daughter, sir ; and you shall have her fortune. Mr Challoner, I shall be proud and content to give them both into your hands." Indeed he thought as much of the one as the other ; and perhaps there are other people in the world besides the worthy Tufnell who consider thirty thousand pounds a very fair equivalent to an amiable, ordinary, pretty daughter.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE FRIENDS OF HIS FRIENDS.

“The outward forms the hidden man reveal—
We guess the pulp before we cut the peel.”

—HOLMES.

STILL better pleased had been Challoner's future father-in-law as time had gone on. That there had been no word of a speedy union, no hinting at settlements, and no urging him to fix a day or even a time, had been all that was needed to fill up the measure of the regard in which he held Mary's lover. *There* was a man for you! *there* was sense and stamina! If the girl had set her heart upon one of those ridiculous apes at the barracks now, how different it would have been! He would have been worried out of

his life about the folly of long engagements, and the necessity for making arrangements, and the uncertainty of their movements,—and certes, they and such as they, who might have to pack their traps and tramp at any moment, would have had some reason on their side for looking sharp and making the money-bags sure; but see, here was Mr Chalonner, quite pleased to be as he was, to come and go, and court Mary like a gentleman,—and he should not lose by it; he should see that, when the lawyers were called in. And a right noisy, jolly, old-fashioned hullabaloo of a wedding they would have when wedding-time came,—that was to say, when his busy season had passed, and he could have time to think about it, and when the old Dean's cough was better, and he could tie the knot himself.

And then Chalonner had departed in November, it being understood that he was to return for Christmas, but that even then nothing need definitely be settled about bringing the

engagement to a close, all being of one mind on the subject. He had gone, and we know what had befallen him. His falling-in-love days over? They had never rightly begun until he saw and heard Matilda. Alas! alas!

In the absence of one suitor, however, another appeared at the banker's house. This was Mr Mildmay, a minor canon of the cathedral, who had come to Clinkton in the summer, and had made a favourable impression on the Clinkton people in general. He was an amiable young clergyman, kind-hearted, unassuming, and indefatigable. Like Challoner, he was superior to the Tufnells in point of birth, and, again like him, inferior to them in the matter of worldly goods; but whatever he was, he was not, according to Mr Tufnell, one of the ridiculous apes at the barracks, and he was permitted to engage himself to Emily Tufnell. Hence her sister's playful references to the devoutness and the cathedral.

Mr Mildmay now fell in with the party on

their way up from the station, and it was evident that so agreeable an acquisition to their number was not altogether unexpected by the young ladies, who, all greeting and introducing at once, blocked up the narrow footpath in a way that Challoner would fain have pointed out, but instead had to find himself the recipient of a vigorous shake of the hand, and sympathetic congratulatory "How are you?" of the warmest description; to which, I am sorry to say, he replied by a jerk of his head, and a "How do?" in a tone never heard at Overton Hall.

Of this, however, his fair companions, happily unconscious, took no note; for all their attention being diverted by Herbert's appearance into a fresh channel, Herbert and not Jem was for the moment everything.

"Well, Herbert?"

"What news, Herbert?"

"Will the room be full, Herbert?"

Herbert thought the room would be full; he also thought the night would be fine, and

that the sky would be clear; furthermore, he proceeded to fear that the lecture, which it was explained to Challoner he was to deliver that evening in the Town-hall of Clinkton on the valleys of Palestine, would bore him sadly, and kindly hoped that he would not think it necessary to turn out to hear it. His friends had let him in for the lecture, but that was no reason—with a cheerful laugh—why he should let his friends in for listening to it: he was afraid he should be dreadfully prosy.

As he trotted along, off and on the pavement every moment, answering every question, responding to every remark, warning the ladies of the nearness of vehicles, finding clean crossings in the muddy streets — all devotion, good temper, and urbanity—he did wonder a little in his heart at Mr Challoner's manners. Challoner heard as though he heard not, walked as though he saw not, stalked through and round obstacles as though they did not exist, and only replied to observa-

tions when they could not be ignored. What sort of a fellow could Emily's sister have got hold of?

The girls, however, started a new idea. Poor Jem was tired. Poor Jem had been ill while he was in the south, and the journey had been too much for him, and he ought never to have walked up,—and now how naughty of him not to have said so before! When the house was reached, good Mrs Tufnell was concerned to the degree of scolding everybody all round, and could not really have believed it possible, after their preventing her sending the carriage as she had wanted to do, that they could not even have taken a cab, when there were scores of cabs at the station, but must needs make that poor dear walk up all the way, and he quite knocked up with travelling for seven hours on end. And the upshot was, that the outraged and insulted giant had actually to lie down full length upon the sofa, and submit to having a pillow shaken up under his head,

and tea and muffins brought to him and placed upon a chair by his side.

Humour was not in Challoner's way, but he did see the irony of this. It did not make him merry, but it saved him from being rude. He could have pitched the sofa out of the window, and the tea and muffins after it; but he lay on the one, and swallowed the others, and he only laughed to himself rather an ugly laugh as he did so.

The rest of the party were, however, in excellent spirits. The lecture was as it should have been, the principal theme for conversation; and hopes and fears regarding the weather, speculations as to the audience, and reckoning up the tickets gone and the tickets likely to go, filled up the time till the dinner-gong sounded. "And we dine early because of the lecture, Mr Jem," explained the elderly lady, turning to him her flushed and bonneted face, warm with the warm room and the warm tea, and the excitement of the evening in prospect. How like, oh how like Mary she was, or would

be when a few years should have amplified Mary's form and deepened the red on Mary's cheek! he saw her now before him, he saw——“We dine at six,” continued the speaker, as the others left the room,——“at six punctually, as we shall have to be off before seven. I wish we could have made it sooner; and indeed I could have done very well without my dinner at all, for we are to have a bit of supper when we come back; and really, with tea now, and all—— However, papa does not like to be put out of his way—not much, at least. Papa is very kind when you take him the right side, but half an hour sooner for dinner he thinks a good deal of; and so we just took the half-hour, and asked no more.”

“I suppose you would like me to go?” said Challoner. To almost any other person he would have said flatly, “Nothing will induce me to go;” but he had never received anything but kindness from Mary's mother, and the rebellious speech stuck in his throat.

Even as it was, he startled her.

“My dear, are you really ill?” she cried.
“Oh, I am sure you must be really ill, or you never would have thought of it. Dear me! And Mary, who has been so pleased at your being here in time, she will be so let down; but if you are really ill——”

He disclaimed the idea.

“You think the lecture will be no great thing? And between ourselves,” nodding portentously, and sinking her voice, “between ourselves, papa is of your opinion. But then, you know, poor young man, he’ll do his best; and as he is to be one of ourselves very soon—indeed we look upon him, and upon you too, as quite one of ourselves already—why, we are bound to make the best of him. So I have ordered the flowers and flags, and papa pays for the hall. And to be sure, if it pleases Emily—and she will take it all for gospel—and I daresay it will be nice enough, poor dear; but don’t you mind, Mr Jem,” tapping him kindly on the arm,—“don’t you mind,

but just go and sleep if you like ; we can all say you are tired out,—and I shouldn't wonder if papa naps too. Bless me ! it would never do to stay away though."

The night was clear when the party sallied forth. "Mild as milk," announced the paternal voice from the front door ; and in consequence the speaker did not see fit to do more than bolster himself up in his thick overcoat, and wind his woollen comforter twice round his neck.

"No, no," cried he, as his wife put her hand within Challoner's arm ; "no, no—none of that, Poll. 'Fair play's a jewel,' and you and I have had our turn ; we must let the young folks have theirs now. Zounds, man, Jem ! you didn't think to take the missus, did you ? That would have been a pretty sight. No, no ; she must put up with the old man, and you go with your own girl there. Lead the way, lassies ; come along—come along."

Now what made Mary Tufnell's lover stumble upon another "Come along—come along," in the whirlpool of his recollections at that ill-

favoured moment? He was trying to keep Overton out of his head,—to banish Overton, drown Overton, bury Overton a thousand leagues deep out of mind and out of memory,—and it seemed as if every single thing that was done and word that was spoken from minute to minute, only served to bring into stronger and more cruel light visions that cut him to the heart. Now, as with his betrothed bride under his charge, he followed the rest of the party up the street, and Mary babbled of this thing and that, well pleased with herself and her escort, enjoying the whole to the top of her bent, and demanding attention and response every minute, one might have thought that here at least was no opportunity for torturing remembrance; and yet as Challoner spoke and listened and obeyed orders and kept up appearances—and he was sufficiently aroused and on the alert to do all this so as to excite no remark from a not over-exacting person—yet even as he did it all, he was living in another scene.

That day week he had stood with Matilda beside the moonlit waves. He felt again the cold salt air upon his cheek, beheld again the foaming ocean and the outline of a face between it and him,—a face that was so near he durst not watch too closely—a face that turned at times its mute sympathetic appeal to his,—lips that were parted to emit soft sighs of wonder and delight,—eyes that shone, reflecting in their own depths the beauty they were gazing upon; and had there not been a bold presumptuous whisper ere he and she had turned to leave the spot, and a silence that gave its own assent? Had there not been——”

“Jem, Jem, what *are* you thinking about? Do take more care. You stepped straight into the very worst of the puddle.”

The hall reached, everything seemed to promise a great success: the gas flared out lustily, the flags made a gallant show upon the wall, the holly-strings looked as like arches as holly-strings could do; and Her-

bert met them at the door with the news that scarcely a ticket remained to be disposed of.

“That’s the thing, my boy,” replied his future father-in-law slapping him cordially on the shoulder; “that’s the thing to stick to. Sell the tickets and never mind the rest. Let the folks come or not; let ’em stay away if they’ve a mind to; let ’em drop off their chairs if they can’t keep awake,—but make ’em pay for their tickets. Once they’ve paid for their tickets, they may behave themselves as they choose afterwards.”

Our party were then ushered to their seats—front seats, but not the front seats of all, because a duke and a duchess were coming “and Lord knows who besides,” confided Mr Tufnell to the uninitiated Challoner; and accordingly, close behind the vacant row of first chairs filed in the next most important people, showing perhaps a little too plainly by their demeanour that in this light they considered themselves.

Emily had of course the post of honour, and the happy Herbert was only too proud to explain to her, leaning over the back of the chairs in front to do so, all his fears, hopes, and surmises. She was not to have him all to herself, however: he had to attend to Mrs Tufnell's beckoning fan, to assure her that the draught which had found out her rheumatic shoulder would disappear once the room was full and the doors closed, and beg to be allowed to draw up her fur cloak until that desirable end was accomplished; while even Mary liked to have a word with the young lecturer, who was *the* person for the time, and who did not take it amiss when she declared that the best flower-pots were all on Emily's side.

They were early and had some time to wait, but that did not distress anybody. They had come to be early, to fill the room, to form a basis, as it were, upon which the superstructure was to be built, and their good-humour and obligingness never flagged, needing only

Herbert's assurances from time to time that all was going on well, and that he would begin directly the first row of seats should be filled. He was in the act of saying this for the third time, when he had to hop smartly out of the way, to make room for the very people expected: and great was Challoner's relief when these proved to consist only of a couple of elderly dames, a sulky-looking schoolboy whose very collar showed that it had been put on unwillingly, and a demure little girl, more taken up with her curls and her mittens than with any hope of pleasure to be derived from the so-called entertainment; but neither duke nor duchess was there, and it was intimated that they would not be there.

They, at least, would not witness Jem Challoner's position and company, and he was spared the having to be recognised by them and speaking to them, which he had dreaded in spite of himself, and to which every other member of his party had secretly looked for-

ward. Even the head of the family himself—even honest, independent William Tufnell—was not so entirely satisfied as he should have been, on finding that the chairs though vacant had been duly paid for ; he had not exactly meant *those* chairs, when he had professed indifference as to their occupation or not,—and though he would not have owned for the world to disappointment, he had undoubtedly lost one of the moments in life for which he was about to pay down his thirty thousand pounds ! It was hardly playing him fair, and so he felt it.

The lecture, however, went off famously. Those who wearied did not yawn aloud, those who slept did not snore, and those who did not understand believed they did. The majority kept an eye of encouragement on Mr Mildmay, who was, as we have said, a general favourite ; the rest ticked off their neighbours, and took patterns of head-dresses, ruffles, and the like. So that nobody was openly in a fidget ; and when the whole thing was over,

and the pamphlet closed, and there was no more fear of another heart-rending "I will only detain you a *very* few minutes longer," or "I hope I do not weary you, but the subject is so very interesting," when the end had actually come—was not only coming, but had come,—when the lecturer, with bows of acknowledgment, stepped down from his desk, and the applause was hearty, and portly radiant Mrs Tufnell burst her glove in clapping, and the banker thundered on the floor with his big umbrella, brought on purpose, how charming it all was—for every one but Jem Chaloners!

"Such a delightful lecture, Mrs Tufnell!"

"Emily, dear, I do congratulate you."

"Nothing could have gone off better."

"What a full house! Have you looked round?"

"So lucky in the night."

"I am sure, with such numbers here, we shall never get a cab; we shall have to walk home."

“How many do you think we came? Three cabs full.”

It seemed as if the whole room now pressed round and encircled the Tufnells, to whom this was due; as if from every quarter they were the centre of attraction, and people whom Challoner in his ignorance had been looking upon as—well, as very good townsfolk, he had now to be presented to as old friends, and great friends, and neighbours, and near neighbours,—it was “Mary,” “Emily,” “Bertha,” from every one; it was “dear,” and “darling,” and “love,” taps of the fan, pullings of the sleeve, whisperings in the ear, even kissings on the cheek all round, and round, and round. It was terrible; his ears tingled, his jaw fell.

In that quarter of an hour he learned a good deal. When he had before stayed with the Tufnells he had been in mourning, and had made the most of his mourning in order to ensure an immunity from morning calls and solemn dinner-parties. He had guessed what these might be, though his present experience

went far beyond what imagination had pictured. Nobody had taken offence. "For indeed it just shows what a kind heart he has," cried the excellent mother. "To be sure there are few young men in these days that would take on so about an aunt, and an aunt, too, that left him a little bit of money; but that's Jem Challoner all the world over. I do say to papa I never came across any young man that cared less about money. Papa does not think so much of it. When I told him that we were not to have our friends while Jem was with us,—that was when he and Mary were first engaged, you know,—what do you think he said? He just up and says, 'That's one of his aristocratic fads,' says he. Not that he thought any the worse of Jem for it. Papa is an aristocrat at heart."

So it was only now that the full fruition of what he had done dawned on the ill-fated Challoner—only now, now when he could least bear it, now when he could most appreciate it. Fresh from Overton, with all its

exquisite simplicity and unconscious harmony, he had, without even the interval of a few weeks, or a few days, to encounter his cup of fate with all its dread ingredients.

He was very miserable ; he had never been so miserable in his life.

And then, just as he was standing up, bowing and smiling,—forced by the awful exigency of the moment to bow and smile,—while standing there, a spectacle to gods and men, with a drawn grin upon his withered countenance, and an angry light in his soft eye, he caught sight, in the very midst of the motley assemblage, of a face he knew.

CHAPTER XX.

THE STRUGGLE.

“ Shall I to Honour, or to Love give way ?

For, as bright day, with black approach of night,
 Contending makes a doubtful puzzling light,
 So does my Honour and my Love together
 Puzzle me so, I can decide on neither.”

—SPENSER.

THE face belonged to Miss Juliet Appleby, the Juliet whom at Overton Challoner had found a bore, a would-be flirt, and an incorrigible giggler, but who now in the elegance of her wrap, and the propriety of her demeanour, looked provokingly refined and superior. Apparently Miss Appleby knew how to behave in public, whatever licence she might give herself in private ; and Challoner, watching in order to avoid her, could not help having yet another drop added to the bitterness of his

reflections, in noting that even this little miss, this absurd Juliet who had been totally put out of sight, distanced, eclipsed, and set at naught when Matilda had been on the scene, now found a foil for herself in the women of his own party.

Oddly enough this was the first thing to occur to him, but it was soon swallowed up in another and more appalling second thought. Juliet here, on his track, likely, was sure to meet him and speak to him any day and any moment—for the first introduction at Overton had been followed by others, and there was now quite an easy acquaintanceship between the two,—what should he do or say, should he be attacked, questioned, and called upon to give an account of himself? Moreover, not only was such an interview to be anticipated, but once seen, she would hear from others, must hear from some one, what had brought him to this place, and hearing meant telling again. The very thought of that telling again sent a

shiver through his veins, since whatever the future might have in store for him it could have nothing worse than that Matilda should know all, and know it through another.

His only hope lay in being unseen, and in the possibility of Miss Appleby's hosts—for of course she was on a visit somewhere about,—of their living so far in the country as to be ignorant of town gossip. The Tufnells undoubtedly reigned supreme in Clinkton; there they were the great among the small, the lions among the asses, the best, the very best of their set. But Clinkton confined itself pretty much to Clinkton; the Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans, as of old; and even though the friends of Miss Appleby might be known to Challoner himself, they might not have any acquaintance with the banker's family, and might not refer to the engagement, having no reason for supposing it could interest their guest.

Certainly Juliet had never heard him speak of Clinkton. Certainly, unless she actually saw

him there with her own eyes, she had no clue by which she could connect him with the place. Lady Fairleigh was away, the whole Challoner family were away ; he might escape, he might even yet escape,—but should she see him, all was over.

His eye never left the slim figure which in its spare sharpness of youthful outline had moved an inward smile and comparison at Overton, until he saw it pass through the curtained doorway ; and grateful now for the press of human beings which had been so distasteful before, he welcomed every detaining introduction, and made the most of every stoppage.

The consequence was all that could be desired ; when at length he emerged from the lecture-room, the coast was clear. It was best, Mrs Tufnell said, to let the carriage people get away first, and she hoped Mr Jem had not minded their remaining a little behind the great crush, but they had so many friends—he must see how many friends they had—and everybody wanted to have a word, and it would have

been uncivil to hurry off,—but now she was ready, quite ready ; and then followed farewells and nods, and shawling and muffling, followed by the brisk walk home, and the promised supper. And a goodly supper it was, in honour of the occasion,—and every one was joyous and mirthful, and Herbert changed the plates and drew the corks as deftly as he had ever traversed the vales of Palestine ; and it was well on towards twelve o'clock ere the ladies retired, and those who were not staying in the house took their leave.

“ You and I will have a cigar by ourselves, Jem,” said Mr Tufnell then. “ Help yourself, and pass the bottle. Heigho ! I am tired. So are you, I can see. Well, we shall be good company for one another. I am sick of jabbering.”

And in the quiet hour that followed, the best part of the old man's heart and mind stole gently into view.

He had bidden his daughters “ Good night ” with a hearty “ God bless ye, lassies,” and had

straitly charged them to sit up no longer, and not to oversleep themselves in the morning as the result of turning the house upside down at that hour of the night; and when they had gone, and the last rustle of their departing steps had died away, the smile left his ruddy cheek also, and a thoughtful gravity took its place, and out of the depths of his soul, out of the fulness of an honest, upright, overflowing heart, he intrusted to his solitary auditor secret thoughts and feelings that were to Challoner's excited imagination almost holy as compared with his own.

He had never felt himself so vile. He got away at last; got away to his own room, turned out the light, threw up the window, and blessed the midnight airs upon his aching brow. At last he was alone—free for a brief interval from that dreadful kindness, that intolerable unsuspectingness; no longer obliged to force the cold caress and the hypocritical smile, and wonder how long such coldness and hypocrisy could escape observation.

He had seen the grey-haired parent's eye moisten, and heard his voice falter, and he might have to see and hear the same again,—but for the moment he had escaped.

He leaned out of the window; his great frame relaxed heavily, and his face worked as it would.

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The following morning saw the result of the inward struggle.

“Why — what — what now?” cried Mr Tufnell, with his breath wellnigh driven out of his lips by astonishment. “Why, what is the meaning of this, James Challoner? You want to marry Mary off-hand? You, that I thought was content to wait a hundred years if so be as we thought right! What—what — what? Bless me! I don't understand this sort of thing, that's what I don't. Marry Mary off-hand! Marry her straight away! But how the devil is a girl to be married straight away that has never heard a word about it till this very moment? And just

before Christmas too! I never heard of such a thing. 'Pon my word, I never did. Why, we never have anything at Christmas, saving it's a hop for the youngsters, or a dinner or two for the old cronies. Christmas? Nobody gets married at Christmas. Christmas is not the time for private concerns like marrying, in my opinion. It's—it's almost profanity, that's what it is, to think of such a thing. We keep Christmas with our friends, with our neighbours, with all England, with all Christendom, with the world——" his voice rising higher and higher, "ay, and perhaps beyond it, Jem, my lad," dropping down again. "Yes," after a moment's pause,— "yes, Christmas is a great public festival, a—great—public festival," pleased with the phrase; "and you and Mary—for I take it she has had a hand in this——?" inquiringly.

"Indeed, no. I have not spoken to Mary about it."

"And that's right; and don't you speak to her—no good will come of speaking to her.

Why, man, I am not angry with you ; it's natural enough, natural enough—but it don't suit my ideas. Now you see, you and I get on first-rate ; you have never crossed me, and I have never crossed you—and I don't want," with emphasis, "I don't want to be obliged to cross you. I'll give in a little, d'ye see ?" relenting as the young man remained silent, and it was to be presumed something daunted if not convinced. "I'll give in a bit. I'll meet you half-way, so to speak. Let me see, this is December, mid-December ; well, we'll say February, if you like ; the end of February. Eh ? Will that do ? Come, I had not meant it to be before Easter. I thought Easter would have done very well ; but as it seems no, why, there is nothing for it but to give in with a good grace. We'll jostle up the parsons, and tell 'em, Lent or no Lent, we must have their services by the end of February."

"Would——" said Challoner, and got no further ; but his hesitating face and tone betrayed dissatisfaction. Having nerved him-

self for the sacrifice, he felt he scarcely knew what—probably afraid to trust his own resolution for a second effort.

“What! you ain’t content yet?” exclaimed Mr Tufnell, half amused and half indignant. “Well, I’ll be jiggered! I never thought any one would ha’ got as much out of me as you have got—you, Jem Challoner—and still you look as sour as corked claret. What the deuce—I’m not a swearing man, but I will say it—what the deuce is the meaning of this?”

“The meaning,” said Challoner, slowly. He felt he was cutting but a sorry figure, and could only wonder how he had been fool enough not to expect and prepare for opposition before. But the truth was, that so occupied had he been with his own aspect of the affair, that no sooner was his resolution made up, for better for worse, to fulfil his engagement, and to think no more of beautiful Matilda Wilmot, than he had, in his own mind, almost gone through the ceremony, taken on himself the vows, and looked on the

whole thing as complete, before ever he had opened the subject. He had never had any clear idea as to why the marriage had not taken place earlier; he knew he had not cared about it sufficiently to press the point; he had been disappointed in Miss Tufnell, and had been depressed in spirit on his introduction to her home and its surroundings: but he had fancied this uneasiness would wear off in time—that he and Mary would jog along comfortably enough, as many another couple did,—and had accordingly been entirely in the Tufnells' hands. If they had been eager for the union to take place, well and good; as they had not been eager, well and good also. But he had certainly deemed that only a slight pressure on his part was needed to bring it about as soon as he chose. He was now confused and disconcerted: a lover's flame he could scarcely pretend to, and no other plea offered.

“Well, I don't know what you are up to—hang me if I do!” ejaculated Tufnell, after a

pause, in which he had scanned his companion narrowly. "The ways of men are as queer as the ways of women sometimes. You are not taking offence, are you?" he broke off sharply. "Of course, if I am giving offence"—and the old gentleman drew himself up, and the colour gathered on his cheek.

"Not at *all*!" said Challoner, earnestly. And yet, oh what it would have been to have seized that momentary gleam, fanned it, poured oil upon the fire, and broken at once and for altogether with the Tufnell family in violence and wrath! Pah! He hated himself for the fiend's suggestion. It had been easy enough—comparatively easy at least—when two hundred miles lay between him and his betrothed, to think of his engagement as a cruel fetter which had been laid upon him almost by a trick, and almost against his will,—and he had felt less and less bound by it as Matilda grew more and more dear: even at the outset the struggle had not been maintained beyond a certain point, and he had

given way, a long long way afterwards ; but he had never, even whilst enduring trouble and dismay himself, realised, until he re-entered the homely circle the day before, all that a suspicion of his faithlessness would bring upon them, these people, so good and kind and true,—it had come upon him like a revelation in the dark watches of the night before. He could not, no, he could not, be more base than he had already been ; and he set his teeth, and crushed down the hope that sprang up within, and reared its wicked head to look him in the face, when he marked the blush of anger on the father's cheek.

“Not at *all*!” he said, in accents that carried immediate conviction.

Mr Tufnell was mollified instantly. “Well, well, well!” he cried ; “I did not think it—not for a moment : but young men are so peppery, one never knows——”

“I am not a young man, sir,” said Jem Challoner, quietly.

“Not a young man ? What are you, then ?

A Methuselah, I suppose? Come, come, you are out of sorts to-day. That business last night, that supper and nonsense, did not suit you. No more it did me. I like my meals regular; and nothing is worse than eating at odd times—snacks here and snacks there; and a supper at ten o'clock at night plays the very fury with a man's digestion. Did you have the lobster?" suddenly. "That's it! That's done it! Depend upon it, lobster will find you out, and make you pay damages. I would as soon eat the leather off my boot as touch a claw of a lobster at bed-time. And now I must really be off: I—let me see—where are those papers? Is it settled for February, then? Are you going to be a reasonable man?"

"I—I ought to be ashamed to—but—but——" stammered Challoner, with inward resolution to have it out whatever might be the result. "You are very good, exceedingly good; but—but——"

"But, but," good-humouredly mimicked

the banker. "Ay, that's it; there is always a 'but, but.' Well, here comes the old lady; we'll ask her what she has to say to it. Come, old lady, and tackle this refractory gentleman; he is too much for me; I haven't a chance with him. What do you think he wants now?—and that the very day after he arrives! And I that thought him a very model of patience and everything! Now he cries out that he must marry Mary off-hand! Ay, I thought I would make you jump. And so I am just telling him it can't be done."

"Why can't it be done?" said Challoner, turning to her. "There is no real reason, I presume, why there should be any delay. I am not taking your daughter far away; London is far away from no place. And as for preparations——"

"That's it; that's the thing, of course—the preparations. Why, my dear Mr Jem,—but, to be sure, I don't know how soon you mean," said she. "If you mean in six weeks, or maybe a month——"

“Aha! But he don’t mean that; that would not suit his books at all. He means three weeks, or a fortnight; I believe it would have been one week, or to-morrow, with a word of encouragement. Now? What do you tell me now?” cried the husband, delighted to inflict his own previous discomfiture on his partner. “I believe he sees no earthly reason why he and Mary should not be spliced before noon to-morrow morning. It’s too late to-day, luckily. Ha! ha! ha! And then he says Mary has not put him up to it on the sly,” poking with his finger to point the jeer. “Tell that to the marines, young sir. She may not have *said* anything,—there is no need for *saying* sometimes; there are ways and means without *saying*. You and she understand each other, I’ll be bound.”

“Ask her,” said Challoner, quickly. His ear had caught a voice outside the door, and he opened it from within just as his betrothed was about to do the same from without. “Ask her. She does not even know my wishes; and

I," he added, with his eyes on the ground—
"I do not even know if she shares them."

"Wishes! What about?" inquired Mary, briskly. "What is going on here? La, Jem, what a face! I declare you look as if you were going to a funeral. What is the matter, you people?"

"A funeral, indeed!" cried her father, with a laugh. "'Tis not a funeral, but a wedding that's in the case, my girl. However, if a man is permitted to look glum when he is going to a funeral, he may, I suppose, give a scowl or so when he is *not* going to a wedding. *That* is what is the matter, miss. What have you to say to that?"

"Oh, indeed! A wedding? What wedding, papa?"

"It could not be his own, my dear, could it?"

"Indeed he does not look like it, papa."

"Indeed I was saying so, Mary."

"Come, come, you two; come, stop your nonsense, and give Jem his answer," put in

Mrs Tufnell, good-humouredly. "'Tis but papa's way, Jem, you know—he must always have his joke; but 'enough's as good as a feast,' say I, and it is not fair to take a joke on too far. Tell Mary what Jem says, and then she will understand. And, papa, don't you bias her, but just let her speak for herself."

"But, mind, I don't promise to go by what she says, whether she speaks for herself or not," rejoined the father, sturdily. "Howsomever, Mary—well, the fact is—I suppose you want to marry Mr Challoner here?"

"Papa! what a question!" and Miss Tufnell looked roguishly at her lover.

"Well—'papa,' indeed! I said I supposed you did. Now the thing is, will you have him now, or wait till you get him?"

He was irrepressible. He was in reality by no means displeased by what had occurred, as must have been already obvious; he was more, he was flattered and gratified beyond what he would have allowed to any one; only he meant to have his own way, and to have it

with a blast of trumpets which should proclaim to all his victory.

He now exploded into a hearty laugh at his own wit, and Mrs Tufnell had again to tap and admonish. "Fie, fie! Now, papa, you really are too bad. I always do say that when papa gets into this joky humour, he really is too bad," apologetically to the silent stern man at the other end of the table. "Papa is a regular tease; and now poor Mary does not know what to think. I see I must take it in hand myself. It is whether you would like to have the wedding soon or by-and-by, Mary, my dear?"

"Soon? How soon, mamma?"

"Why, by the middle or end of next month—in about five weeks—or—or——" said Mrs Tufnell, stealing a suggestive glance across the table.

"In a fortnight, or less," replied Challoner, in a harsh resonant voice.

They all looked at him as he spoke. His tone was not like a bridegroom's.

“A fortnight! Good gracious!” ejaculated Miss Tufnell, throwing up her hands. “My dear Jem! Mamma, do *you* tell him. Papa, you know you said it could not be,” appealing to each in turn. “Why, I haven’t ordered a *thing* yet—not a single thing. And now—oh, you don’t know—but now it could never be, it could not possibly be, not for ever so long. I have heard such news; I was rushing in full cry to tell you all—I nearly ran all the way home, for I said I would be the first to get it out,” the panting girl exclaimed, almost choking in her eagerness, as the rapture and excitement which had been momentarily suspended on her entrance by the introduction of another topic, now returned in full tide. (She did not see Jem raise his eyes, look at her, and drop them again, while the lines about his mouth seemed to deepen every moment. Neither she nor either of the others saw, all being otherwise engaged.) “Don’t you wonder what it is?” cried the speaker, twirling round and round in a pirouette.

“Guess, guess, guess, all of you. Try to guess any way, for you’ll never do it. Oh my, I am in such a state! the others are writing off for patterns in the sitting-room now. Patterns! Doesn’t *that* tell you? Patterns; what do people need patterns for? A—fancy—dress—” looking at each in turn.

“Ball!” cried her mother, solving the conundrum. “Ball! You don’t say it?”

“But I do. That’s it. There, it’s out. Mrs Dobb is going to give a fancy-dress ball. And it has only just been arranged; and it is fixed for this day fortnight.”

“That settles the question,” said her father, drily.

“You cannot compete with a fancy ball, Mr Jem, you see,” added his wife. “The girls have all been just wild to go to one; and though, for myself, I am not so fond of being made a guy, still I’ll not deny that for once and away I don’t mind at Christmas time. ’Tis a pretty sight. And the Dobbs being our own particular friends——”

“Oh, ay, you’ll want to go, no doubt,” put in Mr Tufnell, affecting a fine shade of fatherly contempt. “‘The Dobbs being our particular friends.’ If the Dobbs had been our particular enemies, it would have been all the same to you. You must be on the gad-about——”

“Now, now,” began shè.

“Oh, papa, hold your tongue, and mamma too.” (Again Challoner raised his eyes; the tone was not meant to be disrespectful, but it was,—he could not tell what it was. Never before had he seen his bride-elect show to less advantage; it might have been done of set purpose to mock him.) “Just you both be quiet, and I’ll tell you about it,” proceeded the young lady. “It has been on their minds this great while, Mrs Dobb says; but they knew it would make such an upset in the house, that they could never quite bring themselves to fix a time. But now Willie Dobb says it *is* to be; for he is *determined* upon it, and you know he can always do anything he likes with them all, once he is *deter-*

mined. And so when we met them, they began about it *at once*, and said they wanted us to know before any one else, because we *must* be there,—and if there had been anything to stop us, they would have changed the day. Mrs Dobb herself said that; she did indeed. ‘Mary,’ she said, ‘tell your mother that if you could not all have come on *our* day, we would have changed the day.’ So you see, papa, it was a shame to say it would have been all one if it had been our enemies. The Dobbs are always——”

“Just what I said. And no one knows it better than papa,” subjoined her mother. “But he never meant nothing, Mary”—her own phraseology suffering from excitement and anticipation. “And Mary,” eagerly, “what is Mrs Dobb going to wear herself? What is she going to *be*? Did you hear that? Did she tell you that? For I do declare I would not for the world that we should clash, she and I; and as we are the same stout figure, we might as like as not go

and pitch on the very same thing. We must agree about it."

"You must agree to differ, eh?" said her husband, jocosely. "Eh, Jem? that wasn't bad, eh? Agree to differ. Hum—— Eh? Your nose is pretty well put out of joint by this, my friend, I take it. No one would give a thought to the bride, you see, if there were sham brides, Amazons, gipsies, what not, on the *tapis* as well. Mary is not going to lose the show either. Catch her being married and done for, and carted out of the way, when there is any jollification going on. No, no; not such a flat."

"I really couldn't, Jem," pleaded Mary, piteously.

"I suppose I ought not to ask it," said Challoner, with a bitter smile.

"Well, well; there's no harm done,—and don't quarrel over it you two," interposed Mrs Tufnell, a shade of anxiety showing itself in her voice as she looked at the last speaker.

"Mary means no harm, Mr Jem; but she is

just a girlie, and likes her play. You will enjoy the ball yourself. Dear me ! it has put *me* all in a flutter. I will tell you what I will do, Mary," turning briskly to her daughter. "I will just step down to Mrs Dobb after lunch, before she can get out for the afternoon, and beg her to take it for granted that I shan't be in her way whatever she decides on. That will be doing it handsome ; and as it is Mrs Dobb who gives the ball, it is only fair that she should have first choice. And papa," to him, "you will not be stingy to the girls, you know. It is only once and away ; we don't get the chance of a fancy ball every day, and fancy ball dresses are not to be had for nothing: Is the day quite fixed, fixed for certain, Mary ? "

"Mrs Dobb was going to get the cards printed this very afternoon," said Mary.

"This very afternoon ! The cards printed ! Lor' ! that does make it real. And she will be ordering her own dress, the next thing ;

as sure as I say it, she will,—and indeed I must see to my own, if ever Miss Flaxen is to send it in time. I'll not wait till the afternoon, I'll go now. There is plenty of time, if I go at once——” and she was hurrying away.

“I am to understand that you—that you would prefer to wait, then?” said Challoner to his betrothed,—and, in spite of every effort, his voice trembled under the variety of his emotions. “Is it so? Have I understood aright?”

“Why, of course; how could you have understood awrong?” retorted the young lady, with her usual vivacity. “Pray, Jem, don't say any more about it,” added she, pettishly. “What is the use? You see father doesn't want it; no more does mother; no more do I. And I don't believe,” with returning good temper,—“I don't believe you, in your heart of hearts, really want it yourself.”

“Bravo ! Mary. Did you hear that, mamma ?” cried her father.

Challoner bowed ; he could not speak. Once more fate had checkmated him, and the thing that he would have done he could not.

CHAPTER XXI.

ABSENCE.

“ Love reckons hours for months, and days for years,
And every little absence is an age.”

—DRYDEN.

“ I am ten times undone, while hope, and fear,
And grief, and rage, and love rise up at once,
And with variety of pain distract me.”

—ADDISON.

LIFE in a country town is not surcharged with variety or incident, and can scarcely be called even soberly amusing, unless one has a special taste for shopping, dawdling, dropping in and out of neighbours' houses, and picking up chit-chat at one tea-table to be retailed at another.

It must be said for Clinkton that it boasted some advantages over other places of the kind, in the possession of a cathedral and of a river;

and the cathedral had produced for the Tufnells Herbert Mildmay, while the river had been the resource of Jem Challoner. He was now, however, debarred from even that, since the season was unpropitious, while the cathedral did as little for him in its way. He refused to enter it, and was wondered at, hinted at, had his reasons demanded, and his remissness held up to view. Did he object to week-day services? If so, he must not say so before Emily,—but did he? He let them think he did; he let them think almost anything they chose of him, so long as no one suspected a deeper and tenderer objection. Had he not but the other day sat by Matilda's side in the old church at Seaborough, and had they not listened together to the grave quaint music, and afterwards knelt side by side, knelt and prayed,—and he was not a man—God forgive him—who often prayed,—but he had felt something like this,—if that woman there, that pure, good, beautiful woman, to whom his soul cleaved, if she might only be his, his

to help him to a better life, his to lead him onward and upward, he would—and he had made a vow in his heart, and fancied for the moment it must have been heard and accepted in heaven? To go next with Mary Tufnell? With Mary on the one hand, and Emily or Bertha on the other? He could not do it.

So Emily, poor thing, had to go alone, since Bertha gave out distinctly that as it was plain she had to be gooseberry to somebody, she must say she preferred it should be to Jem and Mary; for though Jem was not a lively bird by any means, still he had the pull of Herbert in one way—he was not for ever running round to walk on Mary's side, and opening doors for Mary, and buying presents for Mary, asking Mary if she were tired, and all the rest of it. Herbert made a regular dolly of Emily: Bertha never had the umbrella held over *her*, though it might be that she wore her best hat and Emily her everyday one; she had no nice boxes of goodies slipped into her muff; and she might be on the trudge from

morning till night wherever Emily chose to go, without once being asked what she would like or dislike doing.

But Jem, Bertha averred, was a good old chap, and drew no such distinctions.

Indeed, whatever the party was, it was the same to Challoner. He walked and talked indiscriminately, he never bought anything for anybody, and he carried Bertha's largest parcel in addition to Mary's smallest, without any apparent consciousness as to which was which.

In consequence he was a dear; and as he made no parley over whatever he was asked to do, never had an engagement, never sought out an excuse—as he submitted to be dragged from house to house with never a remonstrance, and to be kept waiting at shop or rink with never a murmur—he was presently the best of dears.

“And I do say the way that poor Jem is put upon—I shouldn't stand if I was he,” cried his stanch protectress Mrs Tufnell. “It is Jem here and Jem there with all of you,

till I declare I am quite ashamed. If it was only Mary now, there would be sense in that. But Bertha harries him here, and Emily harries him there——”

“Harries! What to goodness do you mean, mamma?”

——“You know what I mean well enough.”

——“There’s no such word.”

“You know what I *mean* well enough; what does the word matter? I say it’s a sin and a shame to keep that poor dear standing about in all the cold doorways in this weather, while you girls are amusing yourselves inside——”

“He won’t come inside; it is his own fault; he will stop in the doorways.”

“That’s nonsense: that’s just him all over; he thinks he’ll be in the way. There he was to-day—— Oh, I saw you all—I saw *you*, though none of you saw *me*—and there he was half an hour at Smith’s door if he was a minute. I went by when you three walked up, and saw you—you, Bertha, and Mary go in, and Jem

turn back and lean against the wall outside ; and when I came back—and I had been away a good half-hour, for I could not have got to the Greens and back in less—he was there still. Now, if it had only been for five minutes or so, shop-windows are well enough for a little while, but—— I was saying shop-windows are diverting enough in their way, Mr Jem,” as Challoner entered, “but I doubt the girls give you too much of them. I like to flatten my nose now and again myself, but I never get a chance nowadays ; there’s so much to be done, and papa likes to keep the horses going. That’s the worst of horses ; I am sure I don’t care to drive, drive, drive every day of my life ; I’d as soon stop indoors to look after things sometimes. But papa says the horses and James are best out ; and the girls are none of them for the carriage—it’s not amusing for young people ; they can’t see their friends, leastways stop and chat and look about them, as they can when they are on their feet ; so I have just got into the way of it, and James

comes round every day at two o'clock regularly."

"Jem had better drive with you, mamma, if you think it would be more to his taste than being with us," suggested Jem's *fiancée* with ready pertness. "No doubt your society would divert him much more than ours."

"We don't want him if he don't want us," added her sister.

"And as to our keeping him at the shop-doors, it was about his own errand we were in at Smith's; he will not take any sort of trouble about it himself——"

"About what?"

"His Turk's dress; his dress for the ball. He is going as a Turk. We have settled it for him; we think he will make a lovely Turk. Do be quiet, Jem; I'm not saying it's you that is lovely. And the ball is coming on, and yet he has never given the order!"

"But you have given it?"

"No, indeed. I only went in to see Smith on the sly. Jem never knew what I was

about until this moment," looking at him to see the effect; "and Smith says he could manage it perfectly, if Jem would only go and speak himself."

"Well, he must go then—go at once," cried her mother, won over to the enemy directly. "Dear me, Mr Jem! what have you been about? Lord! you may be thrown out altogether! Why now, do look about you, and don't leave it to the last, as you men always do. I met Willie Dobb just now, and for all he was the one to set the ball agoing, he makes believe now that he is too great a gentleman to know anything about it. Says I to him, 'Well, Mr Willie, and what are you to be?' 'Oh, Mrs Tufnell,' says he, as grand as you please, 'I haven't made up my mind yet,' he says. 'I shall just leave it to my tailor,' says he. Leave it to his tailor! a likely story! By-and-by it leaks out that he has got it all as pat as ninepence. 'I may have something of this kind,' he says—but I am sure I forget what kind; and though he

is so fine and so fashionable, I'll be bound Willie Dobb has thought of little else but what he can do to set himself off since ever the ball was first talked about."

"I wish Jem would," said Mary. "He only laughs, and says if the worst comes to the worst, he can wear a mask."

("He wears that already," said Challoner, under his breath.) "Oh, don't you fear, don't you fear," responded the easy mother; "Jem is just tantalising you for a bit of mischief. He and Willie Dobb are a couple. The end will be that the two of them will turn out the smartest there."

"I met Walter Moss to-day,—what do you think he is going as?" said Bertha. "You will never guess. Richard Cœur-de-Lion, in a complete suit of chain-armour. He says he ordered it the very day he got his invitation. Think of Walter Moss as Richard Cœur-de-Lion!"

"Think of the cost of it!" said her mother. "Well, I am not one to grudge money—and to

be sure the Mosses are rolling, as one may say; but that chain-armour—and he would never think of having it on hire. Well, well,” nodding her head. “And what is Charlotte to be, Bertha?”

“A haymaker, with a rake and a basket. And won’t she look like one? With her red face——”

——“Come, come, no ill-nature; we are all in the same boat,” said Mrs Tufnell, comfortably; “and a red face is what every haymaker gets with working in the sun. Charlotte is very sensible not to be above the character. I was afraid of what Charlotte might do, to own the truth. Mary Queen of Scots, or such-like.”

“Miss Beadel is to be Mary Queen of Scots, you know. Charlotte could not run in couples with Miss Beadel.”

“Miss Beadel, Mary Queen of Scots!” cried her mother, upsetting in her amazement her tea into her saucer, and by a violent lunge just saving farther mischance. “My word!

Bertha, you are hoaxing. Ain't you, then? Well, I wouldn't have believed it. Ridiculous creature; and at her age too! As yellow as a guinea, and as lean as a fiddle-string! Set her up with a velvet dress and pearls!"

"It is her old velvet that is to be made to do," said Bertha, giggling. "And she says *that* is why she has chosen the character. She is going to cut down the neck——"

——"Humph!" from her mother.

"And put in hanging sleeves of muslin——"

——"Ay, they are cheap enough."

"And work in the pearls herself—old Roman pearls that she has lying by. And she has got a wire frame to stand up at the back, and it is to be covered with muslin and pearls to match; like the photograph, you know. She has the photograph in front of her to work by, and she is really doing it very well."

"And what about the head? The head is the touch. She is never going to make up the cap herself?"

"Indeed she is then. And I have promised

to look in and tell her how it does when it is finished," said Bertha, with all the family good-nature. "She is not going to have a stitch put into anything by anybody but herself; and she reckons the whole thing will only cost her fifteen shillings, gloves and all."

"And me paying more than that in guineas! But however," said Mrs Tufnell, recovering—"however, I am not Martha Beadel; and as I have a husband who stints me for nothing,—for I will say that for papa, he has been handsome to us all this time,—well, I'll not disgrace him. 'Tis all very well for Martha Beadel to cut and chop her old gowns and try to make them pass for new ones; but it would be a pretty thing if I were to play that trick. Don't you tell papa, girls, whatever you do," in alarm; "do you hear that, Mary? Don't you let out to papa about Miss Beadel getting nothing new for the ball: we should never hear the last of it."

"Papa is quite as full of his own appearance as other people," said Mary. "Every-

body is but Jem," with a glance of resentment. "Every one takes an interest in it; and the Dobbs are so beset with requests for invitations, from people wanting to bring other people, that Mrs Dobb says it is of no use—their rooms cannot go on stretching for ever; and though they are going to turn every stick of furniture out of the place, and use all the down-stairs rooms, they cannot take in another soul. There is a Miss Juliet Appleby——"

An involuntary movement from Challoner.

"Oh, you know her, Jem?"

"I have—have met her; yes. I know *a* Miss Appleby at least; it may not be the same."

"Was her name Juliet?"

"Juliet?" He looked as though trying to recollect, and blushed for himself as he did so.

"Well, was she a friend of the Windlasses—those people your sister knows?"

"The people my sister knows. Really," said Challoner, affecting to laugh, "really that is rather a wide surface to work upon. I

know the Windlasses a little myself; but I did not know they were acquainted with Miss Appleby, nor that she was here with them," which was true enough.

This was his first intimation as to where Juliet was, since, although he had come across her once or twice after the lecture, he had not been obliged to speak. He did not think she had seen him. Once indeed they had almost touched each other beneath an archway, and as by a chance he had been alone, he had almost made himself known for the purpose of discovering how much or how little she had learned about him. But the stake was too high; he had hung back, and let her walk along in front of him—only a few feet in front of him—for a quarter of a mile, leaving it to chance whether they should fall foul of each other or not. Chance had elected that they should not, that time.

Then, again, he had seen her step out of a brougham and enter a shop—the next shop to one in whose doorway he was waiting as usual

—and he had thought Juliet could hardly have avoided seeing and recognising him on that occasion ; but she had : she had passed inside, and ere she had emerged again he had vanished. The third glimpse had been merely of the top of her bonnet. But he had remembered the bonnet as having been one which Matilda had noticed and had not admired. Teddy had defended poor Juliet's tawdry taste ; but Teddy's defence was never good for much, and Challoner had joined in the laugh : now the sight of the sprightly plume in the streets of Clinkton sent a throb to his heart.

He had almost grown callous as to the proximity of Juliet herself ; that she had not her stopping-place anywhere close at hand had soon been obvious, and he could have heard with satisfaction that she was with the old-fashioned out-of-the-way Windlasses, had it not been for this insufferable fancy ball.

“ Well, she wants an invitation now,” said Mary. “ The Dobbs and the Windlasses do not visit. Mrs Dobbs says she does not know

why she is sure, but they never have left cards on each other, and so, of course, she had never thought of asking them. But this Miss Appleby is dying to be there on Friday. So she has got the Greens to ask for her, and she is to come with their party."

"Provided Mrs Dobb will have her, I suppose."

"Oh, Mrs Dobb makes an exception in her favour, of course," said Mary, laughing. "Mrs Dobb will go on making exceptions for a good while yet, you may be sure. And she is as proud as possible of being so run upon; she would not turn away a sweep, let alone Miss Juliet Appleby!"

"Harry Swilly is going as a Chinaman," began Bertha. It was endless. Cold and raw as the day was, Challoner went out of doors again; he really could not stand more at one time.

CHAPTER XXII.

CHALLONER PLAYS HIS PART.

"If, when she appears i' the room,
 Thou dost not quake, art not struck dumb,
 And in striving this to cover
 Dost not speak thy words twice over,—
 Know this,
 Thou lov'st amiss,
 And to love true,
 Thou must begin again, and love anew."
 —SIR JOHN SUCKLING.

NOTHING was now heard but of the fancy ball from morning till night. Everybody professed curiosity and anxiety as regarded the dresses and characters chosen by their friends, and everybody had a very real and unaffected interest in, and desire to make known, their own.

"What are you to wear? What are you to be?" was the inevitable first question, followed by a careless "Very pretty. Very nice. That

will just suit you. *I* am going as——," entering into the minutest details. No age nor sex was exempt from the infection; no one was too old or too young, or too wise or too fine (excepting Willie Dobb, and even Mrs Tufnell saw through him), to care how they went, and how they looked. Heads of families—sober, grey-headed men, who would have to pay the bill afterwards—might indeed put out their lips and raise their eyebrows, but they went and got measured all the same, and did not above half like being told that the fly-away coat-tails and tight breeches in the corner were for the *young* gentlemen, and that something more suitable would be forthcoming for them; whilst their portly spouses whispered merrily behind fans, spread their fingers to show the breadth of the lace on their trains, and threw up their eyes in describing the height of the plumes that were to nod upon their powdered curls.

It appeared that there were to be two Harry the Eighths, three ill-fated Marys of Scotland,

a Joan of Arc, a Cleopatra, a William Penn, several Puritans, and at least half-a-dozen Vivandières. "And what do you think those barrack gimcracks are going to do?" cried Tufnell, in disgust indescribable. "Going in their uniform! In *their* uniform! The uniform of the 150th, if you please. And Mrs Dobb may lay her account to it that every one of the hundred and fifty of them will be there, now that it is not to cost them so much as a clean shirt. It is a clever get-out, isn't it, Challoner? Poor devils! they haven't a brass farthing among 'em."

Mary Tufnell had in duty bound consulted her Jem on the all-important subject. He had been in luck: he had chanced to remember a dress that had struck his fancy on a similar occasion, and by describing it,—a plain black gown, with white cap, apron, and collar, and red cross on the left arm—the costume of a hospital nurse, in short,—he had been saved further discussion; for "What do you think she did?" cried her delighted mother, after-

wards; "she just went and ordered it straight away, and surprised him with it on in the drawing-room! I'm bound to say it's neat; but 'tis scarce dressy enough, to my taste. If one is to be dressed up, you know—but, however, if it pleases Jem. And was it not nice of Mary? And Jem has hit off her pretty back and waist for certain. Herbert, now, could not think of anything but a Dolly Varden for poor Emily. I call that common. And papa standing treat for the girls, and ready to pay anything, as it will be the last time—for two of them any way. They should have been allowed to get something better than Dolly Vardens out of papa."

But though the accidental mention of an effective costume did something for Challoner's reputation, and just saved him from being said to take *no* interest in the event of the day—and though this suggestion was, we may add, assiduously circulated in the circle as an apology for Mary's plainness, and also out of justice to papa, added Mrs Tufnell—still he might have

been in disgrace again soon enough, had it not been for what he had just heard regarding Juliet Appleby. Within twenty-four hours after learning her intentions, he had given strict and lavish orders about his own dress. It was to be made at once, and made in the best style, and all past remissness was condoned on the spot.

But lest our readers should be under any misapprehension on the subject, we may just inform them aside, that this sudden awakening meant precisely the reverse of what appeared,—that as long as Challoner saw no escape from the dreadful revel—nothing for it but to be led there a captive at the wheels of his fair—the doleful vision so oppressed him, that he was perforce numb and nerveless beforehand ; but that no sooner did he resolve *not* to go to the ball—no sooner did he gather himself together to revolt and flee—than he went gaily to the tailor's.

Do not be too hard upon him : he was almost beside himself.

A note had come for him in the morning from Lord Overton — Lord Overton, who scarcely ever asked his sister for a stamp. He had himself written to Challoner, and the missive had arrived at breakfast-time. There had been but a few words :—

“DEAR CHALLONER,—The frost has come at last, and we are keeping the home ponds for you. Come to-morrow, if you can. If not, next day. Yours truly.—OVERTON.”

“Come to-morrow, if you can.” If—you—can?—ay, there was the rub. “To-morrow” was the day on which he got the invitation; and though he had told the writer that such an invitation would bring him at any time, on however short a notice, he had paused until he had heard about Miss Appleby; then he had ordered his suit. With Overton’s note in his pocket he had walked to the shop, done his own errand, and then accompanied the ladies on theirs. He had never been more gentle, more compliant. They had ventured to consult him about the rouge for their

cheeks, and the juice wherewith to stain his own skin; and he had responded to every summons, and started up to execute every desire in a way that quite wrung Mrs Tuffnell's soft withers, who now frankly allowed that she had never done that poor dear justice before,—no, that she had not; for, much as she had always thought of Mary's Jem, she had just felt, felt a little lately as if he were coming it Willie Dobb over them, and had thought he might have tried to look a little more as if he cared about what pleased them all so much,—and, to be sure, everybody knew that Willie Dobb *did* care, in spite of his fal-la airs; but the worst of Mr Jem was, she really had been afraid he did *not*,—and that was the honest truth. But, dear, now she felt quite reproved; and indeed she had owned as much to papa, who had said—what do you think he had said? Why, that he only thought the more of Jem for not being carried away by tomfoolery. “‘Had he been one of those jackanapes of officers,’ says papa—for you

know papa never could stand the officers,—‘had he been one of *them*,’ says papa, ‘you would have seen another story.’ Papa is quite mad with them for going in their red coats, poor things; but what else have they got to go in, say I? It is all very well for papa, who has only to put his hand in his pocket,—but we can’t all be like him; and, for my part, I think none the worse of the young men for saving a penny. However, Jem pleases papa best, and that is as it should be, you know.”

“I suppose you have heard what they are going to do with me,” said papa himself, presently. “It has come in just now, the finery, and there are no fewer than three boxes! Three boxes! The half of my dressing-room is taken up with them, and a whipper-snapper of a tailor is coming to-night to see that I am all right. ’Pon my word, I shall feel monstrous queer, I expect. What do you say, eh? How about the Turk? Will you be at home in your filigree? Will you be able to dance?”

“I am not a dancing man. No, I don’t suppose I shall be dancing to-morrow night,” replied Challoner, looking down with something like a smile on his face, as he made an inward interpretation of the phrase.

“You leave it to the boys and girls? Quite right too. Much room they will get to flounce about in, however, if what young Dobb tells me is true; over a hundred people, and their rooms are very little larger than our own. They have a goodish-sized hall—that will help them. If we go in time to see the rest arrive, that will be the best of the fun, to my fancy. I told Dobb we should be there early; we are old friends of the Dobbs, you know”—(how often had he been told it!)—“their very oldest friends, I may say. Dobb and I have known each other these thirty years, and there has never been a word between us. You can’t say that of all old neighbours. I fancy my girls knew of this ball before anybody else did; the girls and boys have all grown up together, and how we have had no match

between 'em," with a laugh, "I don't understand. Saw too much of each other, perhaps. People will say my daughters set their caps higher. You, Mr Challoner, and Herbert Mildmay, are above the Clinkton folks: yes, you are—I don't mind owning it. I'm no truckler; but when a man behaves like a gentleman—as you have done to me and mine, sir—an honest, downright, straightforward gentleman,—damn it, I'm not above saying your birth is higher than mine. You did not come after my girl's money, you came after her for herself; so has Herbert come after Emily for herself: I believe in you both, from my soul. You shall see that I do by-and-by—by-and-by," rustling with both hands in his pockets. "And as for the Dobbs, why, they are all very well in their way,—very well as neighbours, very well as friends; but between ourselves," wrinkling up his nose—"between ourselves, Jem Challoner, I am just as well pleased to have it stop there. To be sure, there's Bertha," suddenly——

——“What about Bertha?” said Mrs Tuffnell, entering.

“Only talking over the ball, my dear,” rejoined he, placidly.

“Arranging how we are to go; are you? Oh, we have thought of that, and Bertha has promised to be dressed and off in time to let the carriage come back again for the other two and Mr Jem;—it is so short a way, the carriage can go back and forward,—and it will come for us, for you and me, last.”

“But we must be in good time,” cried Tuffnell, “mind you. I have promised that we shall be in good time; for I have set my heart—ahem—the Dobbs are particularly anxious that we should be the first arrivals, and take up our position among themselves, and see it all. Dobb told me so himself.”

“You see papa is quite full of it,” nodded his spouse to Challoner.

“Oh, pooh! I? I full of it? Nonsense! I—I only care, as it amuses you. I am glad to do the civil thing by the Dobbs, my old

friends the Dobbs, as I was telling Jem here just now. I am always glad to see them, they are always glad to see me; but as for their fancy ball, it is neither here nor there. If they choose to give a ball, very well; I have nothing to say; let 'em give it. Dobb knows what the length of his purse is; and if he likes to give his young people a hop, and invites us to join, I, for one, see no harm in it; and though I am an old man, and my dancing days are over——”

——“Oh now, now, we shall see what that means; oh now, now, don't believe him, Mr Jem,” cried his wife, delightedly. “Don't be too sure; I should not be the least bit in the world surprised if papa was asked to open the ball with Mrs Dobb. There! That is what I have thought all along; and you may say what you please, it is in my mind that that is how it is to be. Papa and Mrs Dobb! I am sure I only hope that Mr Dobb will not want me to stand up with him; for really with that great gown—what with the length of it, and

the weight of it—I am sure I could never turn a figure.”

“Oh come, old lady, you would curtsey with the best of ’em,” rejoined her husband, gallantly. “Upon my word I had never thought of it, but I should not wonder in the least if Dobb has this in his head. Either you or one of the girls——”

“Ay, one of the girls would be far better, and so I shall tell him. It would be a compliment to the Windlasses if he were to take out Miss Juliet Appleby.”

“And why should they have the compliment?” demanded her husband, somewhat tartly. “The Windlasses have never done anything to merit a compliment from any one of us, so far as I know. It seems to me they hold themselves above us plain folks; and if that’s the case, I should show them and their Miss Juliet Appleby that we can do without them. Did you not say that they are not even coming themselves, but are sending this London miss with other people?”

“Is she a London miss, Jem?” inquired his daughter Mary, who had entered a few minutes previously.

“You know her, eh, Jem?” added the father, who had not heard this before; “you know her? oh! And you know the Windlasses, too, of course? Of course, I forgot. But you’ll take no offence; I daresay they are excellent people. I never heard a word against ’em; but socially, you know, socially, they are not my style. You see it differently, of course; you are of their set; and no doubt they make themselves agreeable enough to you, however high and mighty they may be to us. When Mary is your wife, she will stand by the county folks too, I dare swear,” pinching her ear; “but you see, I am a plain man, and if people will take me as I am, I am neighbourly; but if they are too fine for anything but a nod, and a ‘How are you?’ as if I was their grocer or their baker, and talk of nothing but the *weather* when they come to the bank, and won’t visit me in my own house, nor know my

wife and daughters, why, I don't like it, and I don't pretend to like it. And as for this London miss——"

——"But *is* she a London miss, Jem?" said Mary, again.

——"What she should trouble her head about our ball for, I cannot imagine," proceeded Mr Tufnell, without a pause. "Can't she get balls enough in London without running after them down here, asking for invitations, and taking up other girls' partners? I suppose you will have to ask her"—to Challoner —"as she is a lady you know; you will have to ask her once, but I should not put myself out of my way to do it twice. Let her take her chance; let her fare as the other girls do; why should we trouble ourselves about a stranger who has nothing to do with any of us? The Windlasses not even coming with her, and Jem here the only friend she has——"

Jem laughed; he could not help it.

"Eh?" said the banker, amazed.

“My acquaintance with Miss Appleby, sir, is so slight that it is not worth mentioning. I met her in the autumn at a house where I was pheasant-shooting. She is not likely to—to——”

“——To remember you?”

“To care to remember me. She has cut me dead twice in the street.”

CHAPTER XXIII.

HE WOULD BE SOMEWHERE ELSE ON THE
NIGHT OF THE BALL.

“Drawne with the powre of an heart-robbing eye,
And wrapt in fetters of a golden tresse.”
—SPENSER.

SIX young ladies have been introduced to the reader in these pages, six ordinary, average, unremarkable, almost undistinguishable young ladies, all in the bloom of first youth, and none as yet giving promise of any lasting attraction when that bloom should have passed away. Yet, although all six might have been culled at random from the ranks of cheerful rosy faces one meets with every day, each had her own individual trait, which, if it could scarcely amount to a “redeeming vice,” still served to mark her out to

the student of character. Thus Lotta Hanwell was an important fool, whom the severest shock to her vanity would not have awakened to the fact that she was not of first-rate consequence in the eyes of the world. Mary Tufnell was a poor wit, who had long depended on the laugh of her friends. Emily, less endowed with animal life, clung to the romantic and sentimental. Bertha romped; while of the remaining two, Marion Appleby was a benevolent blunderer, who with the best intentions frequently did and said the wrong thing; and Juliet—but Juliet is the only one of the set who deserves more than this passing attention.

Juliet, to begin with, was not quite what she appeared to be. There was a little deep corner in her shallow mind, and in that depth there lurked a seed of power which none of her fellows possessed, and which but few suspected,—and it was the detection of this ability for mischief, this capacity for undertaking it and enjoyment of it, which made

the youngest Miss Appleby just worth notice in the eyes of the proud and penetrating Matilda.

She had been by times scornfully amused by Juliet's wiles; she was not afraid of either brother being beguiled by them.

And Juliet was useful at the Hall, and she came with her hair nicely brushed back behind her ears, and her simple frock tied in with a ribbon, and a string of coral round her neck; and she would hang so lovingly upon her dear Lady Matilda's arm, and sit at her feet, and lay her cheek upon her knee, and be so childish and fond and confiding, that the only wonder was she had not long before the period at which she first came under our notice been turned into the pet she desired to be. But Matilda wanted no pet, and hardly knew what to do with so much affection; she suffered her young friend,—up to a certain point she preferred her, which she ought not to have done, to the blunter and duller and truer Marion; but she did not trouble her

head much about the Applebys, unless it were to summon them to perform a service or assist at a ceremony. That done, she would call the pair good girls, and commend them much as if they had been her waiting-maids, and presently she would toss them a favour in her imperial careless way; but as for making a companion of either miss, telling either one her thoughts, sharing with either her pursuits, Lady Matilda once owned with the special and startling candour with which she at times allowed home truths to Teddy, that she would as soon seek for a kindred spirit in her daughter: Lotta was at least on a par with the Applebys.

For mediocrity was just what this naughty Matilda could not tolerate; and having been endowed by heaven with beauty and talent enough to have satisfied a score of women if shared among them, she must needs jeer at those whom—who can tell?—she had perchance herself robbed.

It was shameful; and little Miss Appleby—

Juliet, you understand—who was so fond of dear Lady Matilda to everybody round, and who could hardly keep away from dear Lady Matilda four days out of the five if the Hall were occupied,—Juliet, in spite of her admiration for everything said and done by her friend, was sometimes so spleenful and indignant that she could scarce contain herself, when time after time it proved that the youthful grandmother, still in her charms triumphant, drew to herself, and away from the pink-and-white daisies, the budding beauties of the neighbourhood—every man, old or young, who appeared on the scene. It was atrocious, it was more than feminine patience could stand, to see how one and another would, on pretexts the most trivial, steal into the magic circle which invariably formed around Matilda—to mark their efforts to obtain her notice, their joy beneath a word or smile of kindness; and never, perhaps, had this been more keenly felt by Juliet Appleby than on that November night when she

and her sister had been summoned to meet Robert Hanwell's friends, Mr Whewell and Mr Challoner, who were hers and Marion's by right, and upon whom, could she have made an impression—even a decent impression—she might have made Teddy Lessingham blink his eyes and bestir himself to escape from his sister's dominion and lay hand and heart at her feet. But Whewell had only paid her a few stock compliments over the piano, and that apparently out of the mere superfluity of his good-humour with an evening so delightfully and exclusively given up to Matilda; while Challoner had as good as turned his back upon her, his partner, during dinner, and had never come near her afterwards;—and although he could not have been said to have then and there entered the lists with the gay barrister, no one knew better than Juliet Appleby how effectually he had made up for lost time afterwards.

She had bitten her lip from mortification more than once subsequently, when, ordered

up to the Hall, she had found herself a mere lay figure at the entertainment, expected to talk and eat and behave properly and see nothing, while Challoner hung over Matilda's chair, and murmured in her ear, and gazed into her face.

She had been there one afternoon late, when Matilda had been playing to herself on the organ in the dim old gallery, and Matilda had been at no pains to bid her stay; but she had stayed in spite of this and almost in spite of herself,—stayed to see and spy. Challoner had come in presently. He had come in wet, tired, torn by thickets, and splashed with mud and mire, his shabby shooting clothes still on, hung round with shot and powder belts,—just as he was, in short, only having left his gun outside,—and he had taken off his cap, showing the disordered hair beneath in dark moist rings over his brow, and had sat down to listen, leaning his rough cheek on his hand, while a soft undisguised emotion stole over his face; and as he had sat there in the half light, his broad shoulders lounging forwards,

a humble, subdued, over-mastered giant, he had looked a captive whom any woman might have been proud to win.

He had looked a captive, every inch a captive, too. None but a lover durst have sat where he sat, done as he did, come in as he had come. He had not spoken much, and Matilda had played softly on ; but Juliet had left them thus, and she had left with a sting at her own heart. She, too, could have liked Jem Challoner,—and he had hardly seemed to know that she was there.

Her astonishment on hearing of his engagement to Mary Tufnell only a few hours before she saw him in the lecture-room at Clinkton—for of course she saw him, and saw that he saw her—may be imagined. Astonishment had at first been everything ; then came deeper and deeper mortification, lastly malice. He had been an engaged man, and yet he had dared to trifle with Lady Matilda Wilmot. Oh, how deeply must he have been in love to have so dared !

All else must have gone to the winds while he gave free play to his unlawful passion, and now doubtless he was here to break off the match and then return to Overton, to be received there with open arms. The horrid man—it was just like him. She hated the sight of his great big back as she sat behind it, pretty close behind it, during Herbert Mildmay's lecture; she hated to remember how often she had seen it pass and repass along the terraces at Overton Hall. Then she had had a sight of the wretch's face, and seen that it was the same stony stick of a face that had been on view the first night at the Overtons' dinner-party—not the face that had subsequently grown under Matilda's hands—and all at once she had resolved not to see it this time. No, she would not seem to see him, would not speak to him until she had given her home-thrust,—but she would write to Lady Matilda that very night.

Prudence, however, intervened. Supposing that Lady Matilda already knew, no good

would be gained; supposing she did not, she would certainly not like Juliet Appleby the better for telling her. Besides, it would be delightful to lie in wait and see all she could of Challoner, and hear all that was to be heard of his doings, and then, *then* confront him before Mary Tufnell, and inquire, in a way that could not be mistaken, after his friend Lady Matilda Wilmot. The day after the lecture every one knew about the fancy ball, and it was at this fancy ball that Miss Appleby decided to make her great scene. The very next day to that on which it was to be given, she purposed returning south, and would then have the felicity of breaking the news to Matilda with all the surprise, and veiled sympathy, and delicate assumption of her auditor's indifference, that was appropriate and respectful. She would be able to say that she had been presented to the future Mrs Challoner—that she had congratulated him, and that he had been forced to accept her congratulation; and she had seen herself say-

ing this with a troubled and distressed face, and had also beheld a troubled distressed face averted from her as she spoke.

It was worth waiting for, this fancy ball.

Go to it she must—she liked fancy balls ; and to go with a mysterious purpose, with a design on the peace of three several persons—to go with a knife under her glove and a leer under her mask—gave a zest to the promised evening, the like of which she had never had before. Short as the intervening time was, it seemed even longer to Juliet Appleby than it did to Jem Challoner.

All of these good people were thus, we see, playing their own game.

Challoner, whose hand was the worst, was becoming more and more reckless as time went on ; and having got over his first fright on meeting Miss Appleby, and finding that she did not intend to recognise him under present circumstances, he made up his mind that all was yet unknown to her, and that she was merely revenging herself for previous neglect.

She was now with the better sort of people, he with the worse ; and it seemed to him that the ridiculous idea that he would have been glad now to claim an acquaintance he had previously despised, had incited her to turn up her nose and turn away her head from him.

It was charming ; he was delighted with Juliet : Lord Overton's little note, which lay snug and safe in his breast-pocket, would assuredly never have been penned had she sent the tidings flying south. It was plain, it was as clear as day, that she had not heard a syllable, and the reason for such ignorance was seen in the charge laid by Mr Tufnell to her hosts the Windlasses ; and—and such being the case, the devil returned to tempt Challoner. The night of the ball was near, and Miss Juliet was to be there. So,—he would be elsewhere.

She should not see him attached to Mary Tufnell's red cross and black gown that merry evening.

Up to this hour he had been going drearily and dutifully on with what he had to do ; he

had been walking in a plain path, and, though he had been unhappy, he had been able to keep his unhappiness to himself, and even to take some sort of comfort in the hope that he was at least giving no present cause of offence to an innocent girl or her relations. Even in his heart he had not given way to an unkind, or an unjust, or an unmanly thought; he had not allowed himself to fret, or to mock, or to swear; but he had risen, morning by morning, wondering languidly what the day would bring forth—how soon the blow would fall, and his fate be sealed.

Any post might bring him the cool line from Overton which should ring his knell in its congratulations and good wishes; and accordingly every postman's rap sent the blood faster through his pulses, especially when, as happened more than once, his eye caught a glimpse of a coroneted envelope among the budget brought in by the servant, and he knew as by instinct for whom it came, long before Tufnell's slow solemn voice read out,

“James Challoner, Esq.,” and handed the missive up the table. It would be from Teddy, of course. When Overton wrote, he contented himself with the nearest half-sheet handy; even Matilda was not particular, unless she happened to be in a stately mood; but Teddy never used any but the best paper and the biggest envelopes, and he was always glad to show off his excellent handwriting, and make the most of his correspondence. He said he wrote the best hand in the family, as indeed he did; but Matilda appealed to Challoner, and of course he stood by her. He never saw his own name now in that bold free caligraphy without thinking of this. The scrap of paper whereon the brother and sister had contested, their beautiful faces and mirthful voices as they did so, all came before him as often as he opened a fresh envelope, and he would for the next few seconds hear nothing of what was passing in the room—not, indeed, until he could draw one short breath of relief when assured that there was nothing, nothing yet.

The letter would be long, friendly, and full of information—he thought he knew who supplied the information,—and every topic and every reference meant this: “We have not forgotten you. Do not forget us.” How dear such an intimation was, how doubly dear as contrasted with what might have been, may be imagined.

Lord Overton’s invitation did the rest. Every honest resolution, every worthy aspiration gave way under it; coming as it did on the very day when the report about Miss Appleby’s being at the ball was confirmed, it was too much; Challoner went straight out and ordered the dress he did not mean to wear. One was ready, needing only a few slight alterations, and it could be sent in the same evening; and the gentleman professed himself satisfied,—and was so, after his own fashion.

Yes, he would give the ball the slip, plausibly. No one would guess that anything of the kind could have been his intention when

the gorgeous suit had actually come in, and when his good hostess would have only seen afresh what a couple he and Willie Dobb had been. He would be off before any one was stirring in the morning, called away by business,—it seemed he was always being called away by business now; but on this occasion his departure would be easy—he would have nothing to say, and no one to see him go; he would merely leave a note of explanation, and then—then he would be somewhere else on that frosty night than in Mrs Dobb's smart vestibule. His hand shook, and his eye glowed beneath his dark brows as he told himself where he would be, and with whom. No news could now reach Overton before he did; and once there, he might yet keep Matilda ignorant, might yet free himself, might yet—oh, he could not think of what he might not yet do, once he had broken loose, had awakened from the nightmare of the past fortnight.

CHAPTER XXIV.

TIME PASSES.

“ The wheel of life no less will stay
In a smooth than rugged way.”

—COWLEY.

So much for the man ; now for the woman.

Very quietly, not unhappily, Matilda's days passed. Memory, on the one hand, supplied pleasant themes, which Hope, on the other, whispered would soon return ; she doubted nothing, and feared nothing. Challoner's abrupt departure had, truth to tell, charmed her more with him than anything else could have done ; and the conviction that it only remained with herself to summon him back at any moment, rendered her able to support her dignity and pass the time of his absence

without much inward, and without any apparent, weariness.

Her schools, her poor people, her brothers, even her daughter, had plenty of her company, and benefited by her cheerfulness. There was a poor woman who was sick, several miles away from Overton ; Matilda visited her every day, read to her, sang to her, brightened and cheered her dingy little room,—almost made her forget her pain. The boys in her Sunday class were troublesome ; she made no complaint of them, she won them over by patience and forbearance. The good rector of the parish was more devoted to her ladyship than ever. He had always said the earl was a model of a gentleman, and his sister an excellent, charitable, practical Christian,—not what you could call profoundly pious, not perhaps a very deeply thinking woman, but one who was always to be found on the right side, whose heart was in the right place, and who, he believed, would grow in grace as she advanced in life. If we are to be known by our

fruits, the worthy speaker would proceed, he wished all his parishioners had as good fruits to show as Lady Matilda Wilmot. Her conduct to her brother now—he did not refer to Overton—the way she managed that young Lessingham, was beyond praise. A wild young fellow, and scarcely more than half-witted, he was going to the bad as fast as he could go when his sister took him in hand. Lucky for him it was her being a widow,—and scarcely any other kind of a widow would have done. Why, she was as good as a young fellow for Teddy; she rode with him, walked with him, played billiards with him, amused him, and kept him out of mischief from morning to night. She brought him to church, too, regularly,—brought him twice in the day; whereas until she came he had never, or hardly ever, been inside a place of worship since he was a boy.

People talked of Lady Matilda's marrying again. That was all nonsense. Poor thing! she had had enough of marriage,—given over,

when she was a mere child, to a selfish old cur, who had made her life miserable. She would think twice before she burnt her fingers a second time. There was that Mr Challoner. To be sure Mr Challoner had been hanging about for a considerable time; and he must own that just for a short space—for a very short space—he had had his suspicions. Certainly Mr Challoner had seemed very intimate, and he was a fine-looking man, not too young; but oh, there was nothing in it—nothing in it. Lady Matilda was a lively woman, who made herself pleasant without meaning it (he would not have said she flirted for the world); and here was a proof that it was as he said, in Mr Challoner's having taken himself off, and all going on as before at the Hall. Lady Matilda had been down at the rectory the day before, and everybody there had remarked that she was quite in her usual bright spirits, full of the Christmas charities and Christmas decorations, and not even inclined to grumble at the frost, which compelled her to forego

her favourite exercise and go about on foot.

Very little inclined to grumble, indeed, had Matilda been ; that frost had another meaning for her than going about on foot ; it meant Overton's despatch, and it was all that was wanted in the way of an excuse for the same. After being at the rectory, hearing and entering into all the arrangements there, and paying a long and friendly visit, the fair pedestrian found herself still with half the afternoon on her hands, Teddy being busy at the skating-ponds, which were to be cleared, swept, and tidied, in view of the approaching Christmas Eve. That Christmas Eve, it must be remarked, was the evening of the Clinkton festivity ; and it was also to be signalised at Overton Hall : Challoner had telegraphed that he could not come the same day, but would be with them on that following,—it had been at once and unanimously decided that the home ponds should not be skated upon until he came.

“I had better go on to Endhill,” concluded Lady Matilda, as she emerged from the rectory; “I may as well see Lotta to-day, as perhaps she may have to complain of me by-and-by,” with a little smile. “It is really a good thing Lotta is so near,” her thoughts ran on; “it is pleasant to be able to see her and the dear baby whenever I like; and if she lived further off, I fear I should go but seldom. Teddy dislikes it so much: that is another reason for going to-day. I don’t like taking poor Teddy where he does not wish to go. And he—not Teddy this time—he dislikes it, too. Well, well, they are men, and must be humoured, I suppose; we women always do have to take the disagreeables in this life on to our own shoulders. Now, of course, I like going to see Lotta, but then I hate just as much as they do going to see Robert——” and here she caught sight of Robert, and had no more time for reflections—the reflections, you will understand, having twirled and twisted, and run in and out of her brain as she walked, so that she was still harp-

ing on the one idea, with all its multifarious variations, when she turned in at the cottage-drive.

Robert was in the garden, busy with some projected alterations, and his companion, whom he was consulting and advising, and explaining to, was Lotta. Lotta loved to consult.

“If you ask me, Robert, I should not go quite so far along the wall. That is the only thing. All the rest would be perfect. You are such a good planner——”

“You see I have thought it out thoroughly, my dear. You may be right about its being too far; but I doubt it. However, I will consider your opinion.”

“Oh, my opinion,” she thought it only second to his—“my opinion is really worth very little, I am afraid, Robert. *You* know; of course, *I*—I only say what I think; this is not my department——”

“To be sure not; but I am always glad to hear what you have to say. When one gives one’s whole attention to a thing, however, as I

have done to this—— Ah, Lady Matilda,” as she walked up, “who would have thought of seeing you to-day? You have not ridden, of course. Uncle Edward with you? Pray come in and rest. Lotta, my dear——”

——“And without your hat, Lotta; do you want to catch a cold?” said Lady Matilda, kissing her daughter. “It is not summer, though the sun is shining, and——”

“You are often without yours, mamma.”

“I am different. I am not a catch-coldy person, and I have a thicker mop of hair,” said Lady Matilda, frankly. “Besides which, I don’t know that you ever saw me sitting out of doors in a sharp frost with a bare head.”

“I had only sat down for a moment.”

“But your mother is certainly right, my dear,” said Robert; “I ought to have thought of that, if you did not. I will get your hat at once,” and he was starting off.

“No; stop; let me go myself,” said Lotta, rising somewhat heavily, for Lotta had not grown thinner since we saw her last. “You

are busy, Robert, and I have nothing to do. Let me go."

"Not at all. Stay where you are. I am never busy if you need me," rejoined he, heartily. "I am only sorry that I did not notice before that you required a hat. Lady Matilda, the wheelbarrow will dirty your dress; allow me." He drew it aside, and passed on to the house. As he did so, he did not seem nearly so ridiculous as usual: Matilda felt no inclination to scoff, and looked after the retreating figure with a sensation that was almost new.

He was a poor specimen of a man, this Robert, but was he not a good husband? What would it be like to have even such a husband—one who would spontaneously avow after more than a year's matrimony that he was never busy if his wife required an attention? And she actually found herself taking note for the future, and with a sense of something like shame for the past, that there might be worse things in the world than an over-

drawn politeness, when it was thus carried into the recesses of home-life.

There he was, that long-backed prig, stalking solemnly back, stalking along cheerfully and readily with the precious covering for his precious Lotta's head ; and there was she affectionately, if somewhat stolidly, receiving the attention, the two quite taken up with each other for the time being. With a softer feeling at her heart than she could have at all explained, Lady Matilda watched the little scene, marked the little pat on Lotta's shoulder which acknowledged Lotta's thanks, and Lotta's satisfied tranquil reception of the same, as of one used to such kindly treatment,—and then the visitor rather suddenly said she would go indoors.

She would not hear of taking any one else in with her. Lotta had let out that Robert was busy, and her mother could wait till he and Lotta were at liberty. Lotta must stay with him, of course ; she was “a help,” quite gravely——

“Well, I suppose I am,” said Lotta. “At least Robert thinks so. He says he would rather go by what I say than an architect. Of course that is going too far, but I always feel I understand a *little* of these things.”

“Which I do not. And so, as I can be of no use——”

——“My dear Lady Matilda! Of no use!——”

——“Of no sort of use. I will just go in by myself, and you shall come when you are ready. Yes, I will rest, thank you. I have lots of time to stay. Don’t hurry. I will go and fetch down baby and have a play with him;” and with a quick step she tripped off merrily towards the house.

Half an hour afterwards, which was the extreme limit Mr Hanwell’s decorum would permit of their remaining behind, he and Lotta found her in the drawing-room, sitting on a low seat by the fire, gazing into the embers, with the babe asleep upon her knee.

They stood in front of the window as they

passed, and looked in, and spoke, but no one answered, and they could not attract attention by signs.

"Mamma is so absent, she never notices anything when she is in these moods," said Lotta. Then, entering, "Ho, mamma! what are you thinking about, in here? You were quite lost in a day-dream, I should say, just now. Robert and I stood and peeped in at you through the window,—we thought you would have heard us; but we did not tap, for fear of disturbing baby. We thought you would have seen us, but you never looked round."

"The window was shut," said Lady Matilda, curtly.

"We must have darkened the window."

"Perhaps you did."

"And we had a good look at you. Robert said you made quite a pretty picture in the firelight, you and baby. Is he not a dear boy? Look at his little fat arm. How nicely it shows against your dark velvet! Robert said you ought to be painted holding

him just like this," attaching full value to the compliment, with a distinct impression that Robert's comments, whether expressed or otherwise, were not always so favourable. "Do you know, mamma, I really do believe," continued the young matron slowly—"I really do believe that we shall have to shortcoat him before the three months are out; I really do."

"Shortcoat Robert?"

"Mamma! of course I meant baby; did I not say baby? but you were not attending."

"Perhaps not, my dear; no, I don't know that I was," said Lady Matilda, calmly.

"But do attend now, for it is really a serious matter. If any one else had suggested it—but Mrs Burrble herself said I must."

"Well, my dear, do it."

"Before the three months are out! And in the depth of winter, in weather like this! Mamma!"

"Well, my dear, don't do it."

"Mamma, you are really—— All I mean

is that he grows so tremendously fast, that I don't see how we *can* keep him in his long clothes any longer : he is bursting out of them everywhere ; and what to do, I declare I don't know. It is nonsense making new bodies, when he really could wear short things perfectly well ; and yet I do not like—indeed I could not, and would not on any account, run the risk of shortcoating in this weather. What do you think ? ”

“ It is difficult to say,” observed Lady Matilda, thoughtfully.

But her thoughtfulness was, alas ! detected. “ I declare, mamma, I don't believe you are thinking a bit about it,” cried Lotta, unfortunately on the alert. “ I believe you never heard a word I said, and I was going to tell you how nice he looks in your new pelisse,” mollified by the recollection ; “ it is really a beautiful pelisse ; and oh, mamma, where can I get that kind of edging on the frock ? Nurse says it is much the finest and best she has seen, and it will wash beautifully.”

“I am very glad of it.”

“Do you know where it could be got? And the flannel—I should like to show you our flannel; I do not feel sure that it is fine enough——”

——“Pray don’t, my dear. I—I never did know about flannel and things. And then it is so long ago, and somehow I seem to have—to have lost sight of it all. I love a baby,” pressing the infant tenderly to her bosom; “I love this dear little baby very much—but I am afraid I do not care as I ought to do about its clothes,” with a smile.

“Oh, but it must be dressed,” said Lotta, sententiously. “You would not have it without anything to put on——”

——“Oh yes, I would,” laughed her mother.

“Well, you are odd, mamma. But you hold him very nicely,” said Lotta, patronisingly. “Do you remember the day Mr Chaloner was here—the day before he left—when you would put baby into his arms? How

frightened he was ! I declare I believe he had never had a baby in his arms before."

"I declare I believe you may be right, my dear." Lady Matilda was bending over the little one, and trying for her own gay tone.

"He was so very awkward."

"So very awkward."

"Mr Whewell took him as handily as possible. But," continued Lotta, astutely, "although Mr Whewell made such a fuss over baby, and gave him a very handsome mug, and said all kinds of civil things, I like Mr Challoner really the best of the two. Mr Whewell grew to be tiresome. It was very good of him to come down, I know, and of course Robert and I were pleased—but he stayed too long, quite too long ; and the worst of it is, Robert says he is sure he wants to be asked down again. I should not ask him, though, should you ?"

"Certainly not," said Lady Matilda, promptly.

"Robert says he believes he will offer. I

think we might almost refuse him if he did offer."

"*I* should."

"Well, I must say I like baby's other godfather the best," concluded Lotta, comfortably.

"Ah, but," said Matilda to herself, as she walked home afterwards,—“but would you say the same, my dear, if baby's other godfather were to be turned into baby's grandfather?”

And the appellation struck her as so delightfully ludicrous that she laughed aloud all by herself on the lonely road.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE FANCY BALL.

“A freak took an ass in the head, and away he goes into the woods, masquerading up and down in a lion’s skin.”—L’ESTRANGE’S *Fables*.

“*Him* he knew well, and guessed that it was *she*,
But being masked, he was not sure ;—”

—SHAKESPEARE.

GOOD Mrs Dobb, standing in the doorway of her handsome drawing-room as the clock struck nine on Christmas Eve—they kept early hours in Clinkton—standing in the crimsonest of crimson satins, covered with the laciest of Brussels lace, with all her best ornaments finding niches somehow or other on the surface of her ample person, with her gloves on and her fan in hand, — was certainly not the least happy person at the prospect of her own ball.

Punctually at nine arrived the last detach-

ment of the Tufnells, claiming the right which had been so carefully explained to Challoner; and though with them, and with their sympathy, admiration, and expectation, began the evening's triumph, with them also came the first disappointment. They had not brought their man, their great Mr Challoner, who was to have taken such a prominent part in the evening's show,—for he was to have sat at Mrs Dobb's own table at supper, and to have gone in with the first batch of distinguished guests as soon as the dining-room door was open. Alack-a-day! he was nowhere to be seen, and the sad truth about him was soon told.

“He had to go, Mrs Dobb; he really *had* to go,” said Mary. “He had to be off before we were out of bed in the morning, and goodness knows where he is by this time!”

“And was it not hard upon the poor dear,” added her mother, “that it should have happened to-day of all days in the year? Business is a nasty thing,—and so I always tell papa. If it had been to-morrow now,—but

that is just like poor Jem's luck ; like enough it would have been to-morrow for any one who didn't care. And then Jem Challoner is so conscientious—really one may say too conscientious ; for, as I say to papa, one may be too conscientious about a thing of this sort. But papa, he could not see it ; he took me up quite short, and says he, ' Business is business. Jem Challoner is not such a ninny as to let any tomfoolery—ahem—hem—any pleasure like this interfere with duty.' Papa is such a one for duty, you know ; and he thinks all the world of Jem Challoner."

"Well, to be sure this is all very nice," added papa, for himself,—“very nice, indeed,” benignantly ; “and Mrs Dobb is very kind to take so much trouble ; but a man of forty like Challoner——”

——“Do hear papa,” muttered Mary Tuffnell aside to her sister. “Calling out for every one to hear. Man of forty, indeed ! Now it will be all over the town to-morrow. Cecy looked at me and laughed—she is laughing now !”

“What does it matter?” argued Bertha, cheerfully; “Cecy would take a man of fifty, and be thankful. Besides, we all know Jem’s age. Hasn’t he lived here all his life?”

“They will think he was too old for dancing, and ran away from the ball.”

“They will think nothing of the sort. However——Mrs Dobb,” said Bertha loudly, “is it not hard lines upon poor Mary? And Jem had got such a lovely dress, a dress he could dance in——”

“Say costume,” nudged her sister. “Don’t you remember how he laughed at you for calling it his ‘dress’?”

“All right—his costume, then. It had been sent in, Mrs Dobb, and was—sweet.”

“Indeed! Now really, poor fellow! well, I am sorry, but we must all have something, Mary, my dear,” continued the jolly hostess, recovering from her own share of vexation. “And don’t you fret, but just be as merry as ever you can; be merry for two, you know, and that will be the best way of making up

for Mr Jem's absence." Other arrivals then claimed her notice.

There is one excellent thing about a fancy ball,—conversation never flags ; there is no need to have recourse to the weather, the heat of the rooms, the badness or goodness of the music : even the dullest need hardly be at a loss for a topic when on every side are motley figures and extraordinary devices ; and how charming Mistress Mountebank looks in her powder ! how quaint Master Scarecrow in his skins ! what the judge has done with his wig ; and how much the peasant has given for her shoe-buckles, will pass from lip to lip without an effort throughout the evening. Ere the rooms were half filled at Mrs Dobb's, the din and uproar was all that the heart of hostess could desire.

" And which is Miss Juliet Appleby, dear ?" inquired Mrs Tufnell when a moment's peace was accorded from the incessant shaking of hands and receiving of congratulations. " Mrs Dobb, dear, where is Miss Juliet Appleby ? I

thought she was to have come with the Greens ?”

“ So she was. Ay, with the Greens, certainly.”

“ But the Greens came a quarter of an hour ago.”

“ And was Miss Appleby not with them ?”

“ Was she, though ?”

“ I can’t say, I’m sure ; I suppose she was. To tell the truth, Mrs Tufnell, I have not known who was who, or which was which, no, nor heard a word of what has been said to me this hour back. I just go on shaking hands with everybody. For, letting alone that it has been nothing but—‘ May I bring this one ?’ and ‘ Have you room for that one ?’ for days past, I should not know my own children if they appeared bedecked and bedizened as those people came up the stair just now. That I should not ; Willie, nor none of them. I am bamboozled altogether by this time,” laughing. “ There may be a dozen Miss Applebys here, and I should not know one of ’em.”

Mr Tufnell, on his part, was as curious as his wife. "Well, neighbour George," said he, facetiously alluding to the royal and gorgeous George IV. suit affected by his host the worthy Dobb,—“well, you have a wondrous sight of folks here to-night—Jews, Turks, infidels, and heretics, eh? Strikes me your girls and mine look as well as anybody. I have been poking about in all the corners while you were at your post outside, and, upon my word, I see no one who looks trigger than my Mary, in spite of Challoner's putting a stopper on the gewgaws. Look at that creature now,—that, I presume, is Miss Juliet Appleby, the Windlasses' fine lady——”

“That? No; that is Polly Beanfield, my wife's niece, as good a girl as ever lived, and looks first-rate, *I* think,” rejoined Mr Dobb, somewhat shortly. “If girls are to trick out, what fault have you to find with her, eh? Shows her ankles, eh? No harm—no harm. Very good ankle, and knows it, the minx. You watch her dancing.”

“To be sure,—to be sure,” rejoined his friend, somewhat taken aback. “I—ah—I ought to have known it was Polly; of course I know Polly; I must speak to Polly by-and-by——”

——“*There’s* a figure now. I don’t like *that*, if you choose,” proceeded his companion, softly. “There’s a tippety concern. No better than a ballet-dancer—and nothing to excuse it. Who is she, I wonder? Cecy,” beckoning to his daughter, as she went by—“Cecy, who is that? What are you laughing at, girl?”

“At poor Mr Grumby in the corner; oh, papa, do look at him. He did not want to come, he hates the whole thing, and fought against it to the last; but Mrs Grumby would not let him off, and as she could not make him get anything for himself, she borrowed a suit for him; and look at it,” in an ecstasy—“look at it. That petticoat of a tunic, inches below his knees, and the sleeves all over his hands, and the great crease across the back,—it must belong to a man three times his size. I must find out who the man is. And oh, papa, did

you ever see any one so miserable and so conscious? See how he crouches and cowers in his corner! nothing will induce him to leave that corner; he thinks the flower-pots hide him. It is too much—oh, it is really too much! We girls have been in perfect fits——”

——“Poor chap! he ought to put a bolder face upon it,” rejoined her father, complacently. “There’s no sense in showing everybody he’s ashamed of himself. One should never do things by halves, eh, Tufnell? If one must be a fool,—for my part I feel as jolly as you please.”

“What I say is, we are no worse than the London grandees going to a *levée*,” said Tufnell. “I have seen them, and ’pon my word, they looked very like you and me, Dobb, barring the wigs. Those they left to their coachmen.”

“Does not papa look well, Mr Tufnell?” inquired papa’s dutiful Cecy.

“Oh, oh, very fine, miss: you think so, do you? You first coax me into these fine feath-

ers, and then stroke them down. That's the way with 'em all, isn't it, Tufnell?" and the two elderly gentlemen laughed in unison. "But I say, Cis, I say, who is that *ballet*-looking girl yonder?" continued her father, as the figure which had attracted his attention before, again came into view. "Eh? Who do you say? I can't hear."

"Hush, papa! take care. I have not a notion. Some one somebody brought with them——"

——"Miss Juliet Appleby, for a wager!" cried Tufnell.

"No, not her." Cecy shook her head. "Stay, I remember; she came with Mrs Poyntz—a Yorkshire girl. Mrs Poyntz wrote about her this morning."

"Then where in the name of wonder is this Miss Juliet?" demanded Mr Tufnell, almost with vexation. "Is that her?" indicating a 'Folly' in bells; "or that?" pointing to a 'May Queen'; "or that?" turning again to a 'Red Riding-Hood.'

“ ‘Folly’ is Miss Smith ; and the ‘May Queen’ is Chatty, our cousin Chatty ; and I don’t know ‘Red Riding-Hood’s’ name, but she came with the Greens——”

“ But she can’t be Miss Juliet Appleby ? ”

“ Why not ? ”

“ Miss Appleby ! the fine Miss Appleby ! the Windlasses’ smart young lady,—a little round-faced plump chit ! ” cried Tufnell, absurdly disappointed ; for, to tell the truth, ‘Red Riding-Hood’ would have disarmed a heart of stone, and he had no mind to be disarmed. “ I think you must be wrong, my dear Miss Cecy ; I don’t think it can be as you say.”

“ Well, I did not say anything, Mr Tufnell,—that is,” said Cecy, good-temperedly, “ I told you that girl,” nodding, “ came with the Greens ; but whether she is Miss Appleby or not, I know no more than you do yourself.”

“ She can’t be ; she can never be,” muttered the banker.

“ Ask Mrs Green. Here she comes. Mrs

Green," said Miss Dobb, running to her, "Mrs Green, do tell us who is your sweet little 'Red Riding-Hood?' Here is Mr Tufnell dying to know," archly. "She came with you, and I am so stupid, I forget her name."

"Little Nelly Burnaby, do you mean?" replied Mrs Green. "Oh yes, your good mamma kindly allowed me to bring Nelly, as we were disappointed at the last moment of the other young lady. I thought it a pity no one should have the treat, and poor Nelly was so pleased. She had a dress with her, as it happened, on the chance. Poor thing, it was a catch for her; 'it's an ill wind that blows nobody good.' I wrote about it to your mamma this morning——"

"So you did, now I remember; but I said she came with you, though I forgot the rest. Well, Mr Tufnell,—well, are you satisfied?"

"Oh dear me! you make me out very inquisitive," said he. "You see, Mrs Green, when your dancing days are over, you have nothing

to do but gape and stare; and as I know mostly all here, when I see a stranger I naturally want to hear who she is. You were saying your other young lady had disappointed you. The other young lady—ahem—was she,—I think I heard she was to be a Miss Appleby, or some such name; not that *I* know anything of any Miss Applebys: we have no Applebys about Clinkton, but——”

“But she doesn’t come from Clinkton, Mr Tufnell—she’s not a Clinkton person at all; only it happens that she is stopping in the neighbourhood, and it just came into my head one day when we were talking of the ball, it popped into my head to ask Mrs Dobb if I might take the liberty of bringing her——”

“But you *haven’t* brought her”—there was an actual indignation in his tone,—“you haven’t brought her after all, it appears. She has shirked, eh? Thrown you over at the last moment, I suppose? Just like them, these fast fashionable young ladies; what do they care for our poor little attempts at gaiety?”

Not likely any one of them would put themselves about to——”

——“She is put about enough, poor thing, I can tell you,” cried Mrs Green, who in vain had essayed from time to time to be heard. “Laws, Mr Tufnell, that rosette should have been better sewn on,” stooping, as she spoke, to pick up a knot of gay-coloured ribbons which had fallen to the floor displaced by his vehemence. “See now, a mere stitch it is,” proceeded the good lady, inspecting, “and a thread no stronger than a hair. Well, it’s lucky I have a pin,” producing one. “I told the girls pins would be needed; and though you are the first, Mr Tufnell, I’ll answer for it you’ll not be the last.”

“Thankee, thankee,” said Mr Tufnell, somewhat disconcerted; “that comes of bedizening one’s self out in such rubbish—but it is safe enough now, I daresay. And—and what kept your young lady away, then, if I may make bold to ask? What is the reason of her not being with you after all?”

“Oh dear, such a sad pity it is, Mr Tufnell! and what poor Mr and Mrs Windlass will do I'm sure I cannot think, for they are getting to be old bodies now, and don't like to be put out of their way. And the poor thing herself, too, away from all her friends—well, I declare, there's Mary Philipson with a pair of men's boots on! Spurs and all! Mr Tufnell—look, Mr Tufnell,” behind her fan, “did you ever see the like of that? Boots and spurs, coat and collar, and the little hat just over her ear! Well, it's a wonder she stopped short there; she might just as well have had the—ahem—bless me! I'm sure I hardly know which way to look.”

“Oh, it's all right, ma'am, it's quite within the limits, I believe,” rejoined Mr Tufnell, who had learned much within the last half hour; “it took me rather aback, I own, at the first blush, but—well, well, we must not be too particular to-night. And to return to Miss Juliet Appleby——”

“And not a bit ashamed of herself!” mur-

mured the lady, still dubiously scanning the gay *vivandière*, “skipping and twirling as bold as brass.”

“Eh ? What ?” cried her companion, pricking up his ears. “As bold as brass, did you say ? Who’s as bold as brass ?”

“That flibbertigibbet, Mary——”

“Oh,” rejoined Mr Tufnell, disappointed,—“oh, I thought you were speaking of Miss Appleby.” The less he could hear about Miss Appleby, the more was his curiosity and suspicion aroused. “I thought you had meant that she was ‘as bold as brass,’” he continued; “for really, you know, after all, you have not yet told me what is the matter with her.”

“And I can’t tell you ; but I can tell you what *they say* : they say it’s chicken-pox. Mrs Windlass writes this morning that she is all over in a rash, and sick, and pretty nearly off her head—at least, I may be mistaken, but that is what I gather from the note. And I know that the doctor—Dr Bell it is who attends the Windlasses ; they think all the

world of Dr Bell,—I know he was to have been here to-night, was he not, Cecy?" catching hold of Miss Cecily Dobb, who again came near, placing herself at the moment to take the lead in a sixteen set of Lancers which was being formed in front of the corner wherein the elderly pair were having their chat, and who now turned amiably round.

"What is it, Mrs Green?"

"Was not Dr Bell to be here to-night, Cecy?"

"Yes, and Mrs Bell; mamma asked them both," said Cecy.

"Ay, and Mrs Bell is here, for I saw her just now, all over spangles and gold lace. But you see the doctor is not come; he is at Windlass Court at this minute, or I'm mistaken. So, between ourselves, Mr Tufnell—between ourselves, I doubt if chicken-pox will cover it. We all know what's meant when there's any doubt about it's being chicken-pox, don't we?"

"Eh? What?" said the banker, staring.

“You know what’s being going about?” in a whisper.

“Ah?” said he, interrogatively.

“That’s it, then ; that’s what I mean. If it isn’t *small-pox*, it’s nothing.”

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE MOTH RETURNS TO ITS CANDLE.

“ But come what may, I do adore thee so,
That danger shall seem sport, and I will go.”
—*Twelfth Night*.

As the evening wore on, Mary Tufnell began to enjoy her ball. She was a girl, it must be owned, who would have enjoyed anything, and been merry anywhere, provided that she had people to laugh with, and chaff with, and flirt—in moderation—with. To wear a new dress, and hear a ball-tune going, was more than enough to raise her spirits under the severest toothache or heartache she had ever known. And so, since there was no help for it, and she had been perforce deserted at a moment when such desertion was most inopportune, she soon

began to feel that enough sighs had been expended, and that although the evening was shorn of its chief glory, there yet remained abundance of attraction.

It was something now to remember that Jem had never been enthusiastic on the subject; at the best, every one must have seen that for himself he did not care twopence about the great event of the day, but was going because *they* were going, — trying to like what Mary liked, and not to be bored by what gave her pleasure; and such being the case, and with the comfortable certainty that any annoyance the good kind fellow might now be feeling would be solely on her account, the philosophic maid soon picked up her spirits, and had scarce answered the last inquiry for an absent Jem, before she was promising this waltz, and that galop, and all the “extras” to a present one.

“But Mary’s flirtations are always so very open and above-board,” said Cecily Dobb, who had eyes for all that went on. “Mary never

does really flirt, you know, at all,—she would not know how, if she tried; and that, I suppose, is the reason she has gone and engaged herself to that dreadful man Challoner. He would frighten any ordinary girl out of her senses, but Mary does not care how he looks at her. Do hear her rattling on now! *That's* not flirting. None of those Tufnell girls have the dreamiest idea of what flirting is," continued Miss Dobb, with conscious superiority.

The next minute it was, "Oh fie! you naughty creature, you! Now Mary, I'll tell. You throw over Captain James this very moment, and promise to have no more to do with him. What! you won't? Very well; very well. Papa is looking on, my dear. You know what he will say to you. Take care; beware, lady fair," laughing herself away.

But this was only Cecy Dobb's idea of being agreeable to her guests. "Mary likes to have it thought she is dangerous and mischievous," she said to herself; and as for the whole charge, it rested on absolutely no foundation; while

even if it had, papa, who certainly might have objected to the sight of the obnoxious uniform in conjunction with the nurse's black robe, was far too much engrossed otherwise to have perceived it.

This was his hour of relaxation and benignity; and surrounded as he was by mirth and jollity, by a motley crowd of people, who were not indeed for the most part strangers, but worse—old friends with new faces, asses in lions' skins, pussies in boots—it was too much to expect that he should have time or attention for anything but discoveries. Having satisfied his curiosity on the score of Miss Juliet Appleby, he now willingly subsided into the pleased and amused spectator.

Mrs Tufnell also had her hands full. She was perpetually being addressed by familiar voices proceeding from unfamiliar lips; she heard the delighted laugh at her expense; she had to own to her bewilderment, then to excuse it, then to join in merriment over it, then to retail it; she had to eat ices and drink cham-

pagne, to take care that she spilt nothing over her fine dress, to steal a sly peep at her head in the glass when a chance offered—to take a turn now and again round the rooms, to admire the hangings and wonder at the space, and consider if she could do anything of the kind herself, supposing papa could be brought over to it; and lastly, she had to make herself agreeable to the portly uncle of her hostess, who had come from Manchester on purpose to grace, by his august presence, the festivity, and who was elected to the honour of escorting Mrs Dobb's chief friend to the supper-table.

Thus for the worthy dame. Of the rest of our party, all that remains to be said is that Emily quite satisfied Herbert in her "Dolly Varden," and Bertha admired herself in a richer costume. No one was able to find any fault either with their entertainers or entertainment; and, indeed, when all was said and done, and danced and eaten, the only shame was, according to the banker's soft-hearted wife, that nobody had thought more about

that poor dear who had been done out of it all.

How the poor dear bore his disappointment, and what he was about during the gay hours when the Clinkton fiddlers were fiddling and the Clinkton exquisites were footing it on the floor, may now be told.

The light was just beginning to wane when the train from London, which Challoner had been able by good luck and punctuality to catch, drew up at the station for Overton ; but even before it stopped, his eye caught the glitter of silver-tipped harness on the back of a restive horse, and of the light-blue livery of Lord Overton's groom bending forward from the dogcart, soothing and managing.

No one else had come to meet him, but the man was charged with excuses. Mr Edward was so extremely busy he could not find the time, — this was the correct message, — but something else was added with a twinkle of the eye, which showed how well William understood the ways of his betters. "It was

her ladyship who dissuaded Mr Edward, sir, the roads being so bad with the frost, and the mare only roughed this morning. She has not been out these three days, sir, that's what makes her cheerful like. Wo-ho, Jenny, then ! Mr Edward do go it when he comes this station-road, sir ; he likes to come in with a dash ; and in weather like this, there's no saying——" and he shook his head.

" All well ? " said Mr Challoner, presently.

" All quite well, sir. There's skating on the ponds to-night, sir."

" I suppose so. The night looks well, too. The frost holds firm, I see."

" Never saw it holding faster, sir. His lordship is a rare good skater, Mr Challoner," continued the man, who was quite at home with Mr Challoner and full of his subject. " His lordship is better than Mr Edward, although Mr Edward flies about all over the place. Both our gentlemen were out last night, sir."

" Was—ah—any one else out ? "

" No, sir ; I think not, sir. There is no

one else at the Hall just now, sir. I think I heard her ladyship was going to-night, though; Charles thought he heard so, at least. Her ladyship does go out occasionally, but she has not been this frost."

"Not at all?"

"Not by night, sir."

"She is waiting for me," said Challoner to himself; "she promised that she would, and she has kept her word. Well, I have kept mine: here I am. She has but to send for me, and I am at her service. She has never yet found me remiss,—I wonder if she ever will."

It seemed as though he had been years away, as one object after another, each bringing up some remembrance, trifling enough in itself, but inexpressibly dear to his impassioned and excited memory, now rose to view. Here they were at the cross-roads. There was the broad row of beeches to the left; there the little wayside inn. What a brawling the half-frozen brook made below the bridge!—that

brook, whose treacherous banks had once given way when he and Teddy and Matilda were hunting ferns that grew among the nooks and cliffs. He had held his fair companion up, and she had had to cling to him, even while making light of a possible catastrophe. But she had worn a tuft of the ferns, which had like to have cost so dear, as a shoulder-knot that evening.

Then here was the stile whereon his lady had so often rested while her escort gave the dogs their dip, and from which she had once fallen—yes, absolutely fallen—until her other brother most luckily caught her in his arms, so startled was she by his surprising her once when thus left alone. It was only Overton—the quiet, peaceable Overton—who had thus broken in upon his sister's reverie; but so lost had she been in musings that she had shrieked aloud, and Overton's laugh had rung through the woods. What had she been thinking off?

He was nearly as fully occupied by inward reflections himself, when they came to the last

turning of the avenue, and had the first sight of the Hall.

That, however, brought him back to the present. In another few minutes he would be there; he would be running up the front steps, be meeting Teddy—always first—be seeing Overton in the background, and another figure behind him—— No; they were *here*! “Halloo! halloo!” he was hailed as he passed.

“Stop, and let me out,” said Mr Challoner, very quietly. “Take on my things, will you? I see—Mr Edward—in the garden.”

“Here you are! here you are!” cried Teddy’s joyous voice from the shrubs. “How are you?” vaulting over the low gate between them. “How *are* you? Awfully glad you could come. But I said I knew you would come if you could. I was too busy to come to the station. I have only just met Matilda here. We were looking out for you.”

“How do you do?” Lady Matilda had at last succeeded in opening the gate for herself, and came forward to do her part. “How do

you do?" she said in rather a low voice, and left all further inquiries and welcome to her brother.

"Deadly cold journey you must have had," said he. "I would not have set foot in a train to-day for any money. Beastly things at the best of times; and on a day like this, when every time the door opens it lets in a gale of wind that cuts like a knife—woo—ogh!" with a shudder.

"We had better come in and have some tea," said Matilda.

"Why, it's not time for it yet," exclaimed Teddy. "What do you want tea so soon for? Oh, for Challoner, of course. I beg your pardon, Challoner; what an ass I am! But I forgot, and it is so early. Come in, of course. Matilda and I were just taking a turn round the garden, but we'll come in now."

"Don't come in for me."

"Oh, you won't care to stop out."

"But I do. I should prefer it."

“You must be cold, or something.”

“I am perfectly warm—hot; I don’t want to go in at all.”

“Not for tea?”

“Not for any amount of tea. If Lady Matilda”—he was walking along by her side,—“if Lady Matilda—unless she—provided she does not—does not mind.”

Lady Matilda did not mind at all—had no wishes—and quite preferred—anything. In short, was to the full as coherent and sensible as he.

Should they go up the laurustinus walk? The laurustinus was in blossom, and not affected even by such a frost. It was several years since there had been such a frost.

Then Teddy broke in afresh. “Won’t we have a night of it? The ice is as smooth as a mill-pond, and we have had every leaf and twig picked off by the boys. We made the little beggars work; they broomed away like anything at the last. And we have got such a fireplace, Challoner,—you should see our

fireplace ; it's all bricked in ; and Matilda is sending down kettles, and pots, and pans, and all kinds of things."

"You are going yourself?" inquired Chalonner, looking straight in front of him, but there was no doubt as to whom the "you" was meant for.

"I—I think so."

"Going? Of course she's going: what is to hinder her?" cried Teddy. "We have been polishing up her skates, and oiling her straps; and, I say, I have got such a pair of beauties. I wish,"—stopping short—"I say, I wish you would come in and see them."

"Thanks; presently. Are they like mine, I wonder? I must get mine out and give a look to them before dinner. I have not had them on yet, but——"

——"Not had them on yet! Why, we have had two good days, and I made sure that you up in the north——have you not been on at all yet?"

"Not at all."

“ Weren’t they a skating lot you were with ? ”

“ They were full of something else.”

“ By Jove ! and skating in the question !
“ Hang me if I would let *anything* else get in my way if there was ice to be had ! Where did you get your skates ? Are they new ones ? ” He was well off the awkward topic after his own easy fashion.

“ I took them out of a shop-window,” said Challoner, carelessly. “ They are not much, probably, but I took a fancy to them, and, as it happened, they were just my fit. I had no time to get my own from town, after receiving your brother’s letter.”

“ No, we did not give you much time ; but then we had to wait to see what the frost was going to do. It would have made us look rather small, if, after we had got you to come, there had been nothing to come for. Overton said he would not have you written to till yesterday. We half expected you yesterday, but I suppose you did not get Overton’s letter in time ? ”

"I could not come yesterday," said Challoner, earnestly, "much as I should have liked it. But I was staying with people. I could not leave them on quite so short a notice. As it was, I had to take something very like French leave,—you got my telegram all right, I suppose?" suddenly.

"Got it yesterday afternoon."

"Ay, I sent it about three o'clock. Was it here by four?"

"Was it, Matilda? But I forgot, you were over at Endhill, and I was out too. You see we did not know when it might come, and we were half expecting you yourself, so I went to see that the ponds were all right, and Matilda to knock off the Endhills. She gets into scrapes if she——"

"And you had a good evening's work last night?" said Challoner, who interrupted on purpose, knowing that Matilda would be grateful.

"Good? Good was not the word. It was glorious; I never saw it better; I wish you

had been with us. There was such a jolly moon—but it will be still better to-night.”

“I thought of you. I guessed what you would be doing. I knew Lady Matilda was longing for a frost——”

——“So were we all.”

“And I wished I had been here to buckle on her skates for her.”

“Well, you can to-night,” said Teddy, with philosophical resignation of the envied post. This was a privilege he could bear to yield, he thought. Putting on other people’s skates is not seductive to the fraternal mind.

Still Matilda kept silence. “Did you go?” said Challoner, turning at length direct to her.

And then, as he waited for a reply, and there was no avoidance of it, and Teddy had run on, and was calling loudly to his dog, in the silence and shade of the deepest part of the garden, she had to answer “No.”

. . . They did not go in for some time after that. They sauntered up and down the crisp paths, and soon the last red streak of

sun died out of the sky over the fir-tops, and one little star after another came twinkling into view,—and even then, instead of seeking shelter within doors, the three wandered off to the farm, and Challoner was shown the latest acquisitions there; and Matilda would have him to the cow-house to see how much her little heifer had grown in his three weeks' absence, and then to the piggeries, to watch the evening meal—the steaming buckets and pails emptied into the big troughs, soon beset by hungry applicants—while all the while great empty waggons kept rumbling into the yard, from taking turnips to the frost-bound sheep in the fields,—and hens roosted, and geese and ducks clustered closer and closer together in their snug quarters for the night.

There was a rich unctuous odour pervading all; there was a warmth and comfort and plenty and peace about the old farmyard that went straight home to Challoner's country heart; and the contrast which the present congenial company and surroundings presented

to the distasteful, and too often absolutely repugnant scenes so recently quitted, transformed him so fully for the time, made him so absolutely another being, that those who had only known the unfortunate lover under other auspices would hardly have recognised the man. His eyes burned, his cheek glowed, he talked, laughed, jested, lingered,—and although, ever since he had originally yielded to the dear delights of Overton, he had been seen to advantage there, he had never before, in his mistress's eyes, seemed so worth the winning, and so entirely won.

CHAPTER XXVII.

ALL FORGOTTEN BUT THE PRESENT.

“Thy dark eyes threw
Their soft persuasion on my brain,
Charming away its dream of pain.”

—SHELLEY.

AND now for the evening, the delightful evening, which had been bought at so dear a price, and for which Challoner now prepared in a tumult of disordered and exultant feeling to which every trifling incident and association ministered.

He was here again, actually, incredibly here again; that was first and last and everything for the moment. He had never really meant to come; no, certainly he had never meant it, not during this past fortnight at least—not since he had sat in Mr Tufnell’s little room,

and heard him talk of Mary, and realised with an awful blinding glare of realisation, that he had only been playing at freedom and folly and happiness, and that he was in actual deed a fettered, doomed captive. That half-hour, following up the previous half awake-ment, had for a while forced him back from the flowery forbidden path to the hard, straight, dry road; but he had found that road too barren for mortal man—or so he told himself—and the result was, Hurrah for Overton! beautiful, bewitching Overton! Every obstacle had been surmounted, every scruple and misgiving flung to the winds, and he was here—here at last.

He looked about him with kindling ecstasy when at length he was alone, and could draw a breath and estimate his bliss. They had given him his own old room, and as he drew aside the curtain and pulled up the blind, eager to gaze once more across the broad expanse of snowy upland, the moon rising full and bright, illumined nearly every part

of the old-fashioned chamber, lit up the faded hangings of the bed, and irradiated the prints on the wall. How well he knew every face and form in those prints ! He had had time enough to study them inch by inch, and to be sick to death of one and all during those five days when he had been condemned to lie in bed fretfully staring at any object which was in front of him ; he had hated each severally more than the other, as each in turn engaged his irritated attention, — but now, now they came back to him as ancient enemies turned into beloved friends, chosen welcome associates. The wall-paper, the book-cases, the huge cumbrous arm-chairs, the very brass fender and fire-irons that used to be such nuisances, always clattering down and making his head ache when any one touched them, and the legs of the writing-table, that got into one's way at every turn, now seemed to wonder that he could ever have regarded them with any but the kindest eye. The blotting-book ? But no, it had ever been a

fiend ; no, it remained so ; he drew the line there—he could not love it yet. But he would not write to Mary on this visit at all events : he was only here for such a very short time. Of course he could not tell precisely how long, but any way he should not think about it for the next day or two. Let the future be gone on this night of nights ; for the present he was in paradise, and he would not mar his paradise, no, not even in thought.

And Matilda was alone when he went downstairs presently, and he walked straight up to her in the firelight, and perhaps he told her then—but no matter, they were not talking at all when the brothers came in, but were standing mutely together on the hearth-rug, nor did either pay any special heed to the remarks of the new-comers, while Matilda took to busily placing with her own hands great logs of wood on the fire ; and Challoner, watching silently, seemed to forget to help her.

They woke up by-and-by, however, and

were heard lightly laughing as they led the way into the dining-room ; and the dinner-table was bedecked for Christmas Eve with holly and laurustinus, and a sly branch of misletoe, which no one saw of course, and which two people at least could have done without. But nothing could come much amiss on such a night. Even a servant's stupidity must be condoned, — poor simple soul, he meant it well — and after all, what was it? By nine o'clock the moon was at her height ; and though a few fleecy clouds were scattered here and there beneath the brilliant firmament, they scarce stirred in the still atmosphere, and cast no shadow anywhere. The ponds on which the ice had been guarded and tended were about half a mile from the house, on the edge of a long low wood, one bank being nearly on a level with the water, the other sloping swiftly upwards. Three good-sized pools ran into one another almost in a direct line ; and a couple of islands near the centre of the largest seemed to cut

it in two, and turn the three into four. It was on one of these islets that the brick fireplace had been constructed under Teddy's auspices; and as the time for using it arrived, a fire was lit, and two or three servants were despatched from the Hall, bearing kettles, cans, pots, and other necessities.

It was explained to Challoner, that it was not entirely on their own account that so much preparation was made.

"You must know," said Lady Matilda, "that from time immemorial (that means since *I* came back and made them do it) Overton ponds have been free to all when the ice bears (they are free, for that matter, when it does not), only we make this proviso, like the Cornish clergyman among the wreckers, that we 'get down, and all start fair.' We never really kept any one off till last night; but—we did last night."

"We did," said Teddy. "By Jove! we had to keep our eyes open, too. The ice would have been murdered."

“How did you manage it?”

“Oh, we had it given out that there were to be cakes and ale to-night, and every one who put in an appearance yesterday was caught by Charles. I say, look at the kettles. Matilda, I should hope you have enough kettles, at all events.”

“Mrs Wadden herself bustled up to my door just now to ask at what hour she should send the second supplies.”

“What do the supplies consist of?” inquired Challoner.

“Hot-pot, sausages, plum-pudding, roast potatoes. Overton skating is very popular, Mr Challoner.”

“I have no doubt it is, Lady Matilda.”

Challoner's skates were not so perfect in their mechanism as Teddy's; but when it was understood that they were the best he could get, and that his own were better, but were uncome-at-able on the short notice given, all were ready to find that they would do what was wanted, and that too superior skates often

resulted in no skating. For instance, even Teddy's latest acquisitions, new, glossy, and spotless,—would they work as well as Overton's, which had seen many a winter? Teddy had a business with the joints, to begin with; and although he was very anxious to display the working and prove their perfection, and though every one was willing to believe and ready to agree, his brother had perhaps a shade more confidence in his time-worn couple.

Then the little pair came under notice, and Challoner took them at once into his keeping, making fast the buckles across his arm, and jingling his own, as though he liked to hear the two in each other's company. He had a gimlet; he did not need to have one hunted out for him.

"Well, you *are* a fellow," cried Teddy. "You have everything. How on earth did you remember to bring a gimlet?"

"I knew we should want them."

"Want them? Of course. But we have lots."

"There are never too many. While you are putting on your skates, I might wish to be putting on—your sister's."

"Not your own, of course. And did you get the gimlet at Clinkton too?"

"Yes." But he wished they had not known the name of Clinkton so well. It almost made him start when now and again Teddy—for it was always Teddy—would burst out with Clinkton something or other; he could not help feeling that if—or when the news should come, the very sound of Clinkton would bring with it a terrible conviction. He put on his thick greatcoat again, thoughtfully.

But thoughtfulness wore off,—everything wore off except joyous anticipation and exhilaration as the quartet set forth, Challoner with the lady in front, the brothers' cigars obliging them to keep a pace behind. "Just for look's sake, not because Matilda minds," explained Teddy. "It does not do for people to see," he added.

Challoner agreed, and would himself smoke—presently.

The crisp snow crackled beneath their feet as they left the path and crossed the grass towards the wood; and a very short time enabled the party to come within sight of their destination.

“Lots of people there,” cried Teddy. “I say, are they on?” sharply. “No; it is only the servants crossing back and forwards to the fire. Oh, I say, look at the fire! And look at the black figures round it! Do you see them, Challoner?” calling to him. “Do you see the cannibals dancing round the blaze? Eh? Aren’t they like that? Here are some more coming along behind us,” turning his head. “Who can they be, I wonder? Three,—four,—four people. Oh, and I see a lot more down there, along the Seaborough road.”

“Don’t speak so loud,” his brother reminded him; “you forget how far the voice is carried on a night like this.”

“They are far enough away. Who can they

be? Matilda," running on to her—"Matilda, who can those people be? There are two ladies. It can't be the Applebys?"

Challoner's heart jumped.

"The Applebys? No; I hardly think so," replied Matilda, all unconscious. "They would not come without our sending word."

"And did you not send word?"

"Oh, never mind, Teddy, I——"

——"Do you mean to say you did not send them word?" he was pressing on by her side. "Well, I never—I thought, of course, you would send to them the first thing."

"What for? They are away,—some of them at least are away. Juliet——"

——"She was to come back to-day: you know that quite well."

("Then how could she be at the Clinkton ball?" thought Challoner.)

"She was not indeed, Teddy: that is to say, I—I am *quite sure* she was not."

"How can you be sure? I am not sure, and I know at least as much about the

Applebys as you do. It was either to-day or to-morrow she was to come——”

——“Well, it was to-morrow then.”

“It was nothing of the sort. Oh, it was too bad of you not to send. They will be awfully hurt. They always ask us whenever they have anything, and we have always asked them too, before,—always. Why did you not do it?”

Matilda did not know—did not think—did not really feel at all sure that it would have been—have been of any use. Marion had a cold——

——“Last Sunday!” cried her brother.
“Nearly a week ago!”

“It is not likely she would be fit to come out at night yet.”

“You might have given her the option.”

“And Juliet away.”

“She is not away, I tell you. She is back to-day, and we must get her somehow. I wonder what we ought to do. It is not too late to send yet.”

"Oh, it is ; much, *much* too late."

"Charles would be there in twenty minutes."

"He would not be there under half an hour ; certainly not under half an hour, I should say three-quarters, even by the short cut."

"Well, there would still be time."

"Oh, Teddy, don't. Do let it be as it is. Do let us be content with those we have. There are plenty here," pleaded she ; "why should we always have the Applebys ?" ("Ay, why indeed ?" thought Challoner.) "The Applebys are all very well," continued the speaker ; "but Applebys year after year, morning, noon, and night, *toujours* Applebys—I am beginning to be tired of it," cried Lady Matilda, with sudden petulance. "Do, for mercy's sake, let us have one evening, one single solitary evening, without the Applebys."

"Well, I call it deuced unkind," muttered Teddy. But Challoner was smiling.

"Robert was quite concerned at my coming out to-night ;" there had been a full minute's

pause, during which the last subject was felt to be quite done away with, and Lady Matilda had slipped her hand, by way of making friends, under her ill-used brother's arm. There had been a brisk advance for some paces, ere she resumed, in a fresh tone suited to a fresh topic, "Robert was not at all sure about it, I can tell you. He thought the whole thing—ah—'imprudent'; had he spoken the word that was in his heart, he would have said 'uncivilised.' I was over there yesterday, and he had heard, as he always does hear, of our intentions."

"They will not be here to-night, then?"

"They? Robert and Lotta? Robert turn out at this unearthly hour, after he has arrayed himself in his evening clothes, and brushed up his evening hair,—and Lotta lay aside her hemming and stitching, her fifteenth tuck that she is putting into baby's frock? And how could they leave the house, you know? Oh, you have no idea what an affair of state it is when the house has got to be left on the occa-

sion of a dinner-party, or some such festivity of sufficient importance ! Robert will explain to you with pleasure, if you ask him, the nature of the precautions taken : how this door is barred, and that bolted, and how all the maids sit up ; and I am not sure if the baby is not exhibited at each of the windows in turn, by way of scaring the midnight robber. But as for entering into all these solemn arrangements for anything short of a real, actual, tangible dinner-party, as for doing anything of the kind for a mere piece of child's-play like this,—oh, you surely do not suppose my sensible son-in-law capable of such frivolity."

" And I don't believe he can skate a hang," added Teddy.

They had now reached the ponds, round which a considerable number of expectant people had collected, and all the regret of young Lessingham for the missing Applebys instantly vanished on finding their places so well supplied. " Mrs Barnes, you here !" he cried, joyously, to a farmer's rotund dame, who, warmly

wrapped and muffled, had come, nothing loath, to see the sport; "and Barnes is getting on his skates. Holloa! Johnson, I haven't seen you since last frost, I believe. You came down on purpose? That's right. Fine night, Jem. The ice is first-rate. Matilda," coming back to her, "I say, Matilda, there are the Miss Robinsons; do go and speak to them. They are huddling together over there, and I dare say they don't know whether to begin or not. You had better go before you get on your skates; they will take it civil. Challoner, come along and see the fire. Who is that Overton has got hold of? Oh, the rector. Oh, come, let us shake hands with the rector. Awfully glad to see you, sir; the ice is splendid: I shall look you up presently to join in some things. Now, then, Challoner,—oh, here come the Livingstons, I'll bet anything"—staring hard—"I'll bet any money that's the Livingston girls getting over the fence now. They are from Seaborough, that lot." Aside: "Matilda will not be over glad to see them;

and between you and me, it is rather cheeky. They are the hotel-keeper's daughters, you know,—that big hotel at this end of the town. They had better have gone somewhere nearer there; but I hope Matilda won't be bad to them. The poor girls like the fun, I suppose; and they are go-ahead skaters, though Matilda says they do it vulgarly. They do sprawl about rather; and you should have seen how one of them went on last year. That's the little girl who was with them then, I do believe," watching intently. "Yes, I do believe it is; and she could hardly put one foot in front of another! Well, I hope she has improved. Oh, by Jove! here are the Germans. Oh, now you will see some fun. Hie! Mr Müller, this is the best way," taking off his cap politely; "let me help Mrs Müller down the bank. There are some benches along this way, and we have put down a piece of carpet. My sister is here herself to-night. She will be on directly."

"It is so very kind to have such nice place kept," replied the German, gratefully. "Mrs

Müller and myself we cannot refrain to come. We have walk all the distance. What a beautiful night !”

“And you should see that little woman going it !” said Teddy, turning back to Chalonier. “They have walked here, walked over two miles, and she will skate all night, and walk back again, and think nothing of it. She skates like anything,—out and out the best woman here. I say, we may as well go on now ; there is no need to wait longer : I can keep a look-out if any more come. Let us go to that bench.”

“I am waiting to help your sister.”

“What is she about ? Where has she gone ?”

“To the islands. She crossed a few minutes ago : there she is now, between us and the fire.”

“Ay, seeing to things. Perhaps some of the folks would like a cup of tea or coffee before they begin. The Müllers would, I am sure. I will tell Matilda——”

"*I* will tell her," said Challoner. "They are waiting for you to take the lead on the ice. Look, all those people are ready, but they don't like to take it on themselves to start. You fire away, like a good fellow, and I will look after the coffee."

"We may begin now, I think," said Lord Overton, coming up at the moment. "Where's the gimlet, Ted?"

"Well, I'm using it," said Teddy.

"Here is mine," said Challoner. "I am going to hand round cups for Lady Matilda;" and he departed.

Matilda, bright and busy as the rest, made him useful at once. She was having eatables and drinkables handed round for all who chose, and many non-performers, who had been standing about for some little time, now gathered round and received steaming cups with due appreciation. Into the middle of this row presently darted Teddy with a fresh idea.

"Have you seen the slide? It is in that

corner. We have given them up that corner, or else they would be a perfect nuisance, sliding about everywhere. Hie! all of you who want to slide, there's the place."

"I'll start them!" cried Challoner, and went down the slide like a schoolboy.

It was not till the sport was in full swing that Matilda had, to all appearance, time for more than a passing command for her knight. She was too intent on hospitality, too desirous of fulfilling her duties, too industrious; but the time came at last.

I will not say that longer was taken than needed to put on those pretty little skates, since every one knows that one cannot be too careful on such a point, and that the slightest carelessness may give rise to an accident; but undoubtedly no one could have accused Mr Challoner of hurrying over his task. And since, after all, the great thing is to take pains and do the thing well, regardless of time or trouble, why suggest that he might have been a trifle quicker in his

movements? He was sharp enough about putting on his own. New as they were to him, he had them adjusted in a trice, and was off, and by Matilda's side ere she had been twice round the ponds; and, truth to tell, from that moment they were seldom apart for the remainder of the evening.

Happily he was not enough of a proficient to be of value to the brothers, who were performing feats in company with the rector, and who had at least the merit of doing what they did with skill and grace, and of not attempting more than they could accomplish. Challoner found Lady Matilda's powers, he vowed, quite enough for him. Figures she did not attempt; but with what marvellous ease and delicacy of motion she glided hither and thither,—how quietly, with what elegance!

“Why, yes,” said Overton, to whom a remark was hazarded; “yes, Matilda skates like a lady. I like it myself; but she cannot *do* anything, you know—she cannot even go backwards. There is little Mrs Müller—I

wish you had been over there just now, she was making circles most wonderfully, most beautifully," — the quiet Overton was quite warm; "I have never seen anything more perfect," he ran on enthusiastically. "And her long backward curve, it is something to watch. Her husband is the queerest object. Look, there he goes. Round and round like a mad creature. Did you ever see such a swing as he has got on now? If he came across anything in the shadow over there, it would be a bad look-out. Always one foot high in front of the other: and those turned-up skates! There he goes—there he goes. Have you noticed him? But he enjoys himself, and that is everything. As for his wife, it is a treat to see her."

"Is that Mrs Müller you are speaking of?" said Teddy, joining them. Matilda had sat down for a moment. "Mrs Müller is in first-rate form to-night. I have been going round with her; did you see us? We passed you and Matilda just now," to Challoner.

“Your sister’s skating is perfect, to my mind,” said Challoner. He felt as if he must say it.

“Matilda? Oh, she goes neatly enough. She ought to strike out more though; she ought to get on more swing——”

——“She would spoil all if she did. Look at her now,” as the slight dark figure was seen gliding towards them; “there is not a movement perceptible, she seems to float, to steal along involuntarily; it is the very poetry of motion,”—he stopped, deeply colouring in the darkness, and wishing he had held his tongue; the words had burned his lips. But whether or not any one else noticed, he could not tell; they both turned to Matilda, and she was herself the one to speak.

“Do you hear the bells? Listen to the bells. Had it not been for this calm still night they would not have been carried so far as here. Hark! how loud and sweet they sound!”

“They are from Westland, Lady Matilda,”

said the rector, coming up. "There are two more bells added to the peal, and that is how you notice them. I don't think I ever remember hearing the chime before from the ponds."

"They are in honour of Challoner," said Teddy, with a laugh. Everything, he vowed, was in honour of Challoner. On his account the ice was better, the night was brighter, the people merrier, the attendance larger, and the sport kept up later, than it had ever been before. But for him the evening would never have been half what it was. If he had not come, it would have spoilt all.

"Yes, indeed, Mr Challoner is very lucky," began the rector.

But his young friend laughed again. "It is *we*, not *he*—*we* are lucky. We just hit him off—sent for him at the right moment, and scored A 1," cried the young man, wheeling round and round the circle in little flights of exultation. "Now you see how neat the whole thing was, and what jolly fun we are

having. Could anything be better? We have nothing left to wish for——”

——“Not even the Applebys?” from Matilda.

“Bother the Applebys!” cried Teddy, quite heartily.

And how did Challoner feel under such heartiness, such warmth? It needed all his recklessness, all his effrontery, and all his passion to master at moments like this the desperate sense of shame and self-loathing evoked by the unwitting tormentor; it needed all the fumes of a new intoxication to stifle the baleful remembrance. He would have to go off alone with Matilda, to listen and look, and stun again with such narcotics the throbbing reawakened nerve; and he did. And then ——, he was laughing more gaily, striking out more boldly, to all appearance enjoying the scene more thoroughly, than any.

At length the feast and the fray alike drew near an end. People cannot absolutely skate on for ever; and though it might have seemed

as though the charming Mrs Müller would never have tired making more and more faultless curves, and as if the Miss Livingstons were inexhaustible in their wild excursions—while the timid were growing ever more venturesome, and the stately had unbent, and the bystanders had disappeared, and none remained but the hardy and the indefatigable,—the time at length did come when even these proved themselves human.

Challoner, who had been despatched to attend to some of the departures, returned to find Matilda quietly resting on a fallen tree by the side.

“You are tired at last?” he said, sitting down beside her.

“Tired at last. Yet as long as I was on the wing, I really could not have supposed it. It is only when one sits down that one feels it a little difficult to get up again.”

“I hope you have not done too much?”

“You shall see. To-morrow I will do it all over again.”

“To-morrow?” said Challoner, dreamily—
“*To-morrow?*”

He did not feel, he *knew*, that there would never be such a to-morrow for him. A cold touch seemed to be laid on his heart—a deadly chill, a mocking foreboding. No; whatever the morrow might bring of good or evil, he should never again, by Matilda's side, skim the frozen pools of Overton Hall; never again——

“Did you speak?” he said, hurriedly.

She had: had inquired the hour, had remarked upon the gradual lessening of their number, on several other things; and he had heard as though he heard not, but had at length burst forth into one long, deep, irrepressible sigh, so spontaneous, so sad, so full of tender significance, that now, feeling the moment almost too much for her, and at a loss how to bear her part in it, she was begging him to rise and lend his aid in enabling her to do the same. From the lowness of her seat she was unable to get up without a help-

ing hand ; and as she spoke she put out her own.

Challoner, still half asleep, held it—hung over it—kissed it. He scarcely knew what he was doing ; that is all that can be said for him. He had a dim idea of taking leave of some fair scene, and of letting it go with a dull anguish which the presumptuous deed would soothe. It was not until aroused by the hasty withdrawal — or would-be withdrawal—of the little outraged member, and by the movement, which could be but a movement—for she could not really stir or turn, so unfortunately happy had been the moment chosen,—it was not until then, that he started to feel how deeply he had plunged. That sense was all that was needed. Like a spur, it drove him on. Again he caught the hand ; how soft and warm it felt—bare, gloveless—between his ! he held it fast, and lifted his head with sullen determination.

“ I shall not let this go,” he said. “ I—can’t. See now, I——”

"Here they are! here they are!" cried a jubilant voice, as Teddy, radiant as ever, emerged from the darkness. "We thought you had given us the slip, you two; and Overton and I were just going off, when I said I would take one more look round. You had hid yourselves pretty nicely, I must say—right in the shadow over here. Well, now, are you ready to come?"

Challoner was already raising his companion, and steadying her on the glassy surface.

"I suppose they are all gone?" he said.

"Every man-Jack of them, Livingstons and all. They were the last. They want to come to-morrow," with a slight air of apprehension.

No response.

"I say, Matilda, the Livingstons want to come to-morrow."

But still he met with no answer, no objection, no demur. It seemed as if either Challoner's dim foreboding of "to-morrow" had fallen on Matilda also, or that she could not see, nor think, nor feel beyond to-night. She

was wondering, almost weeping,—and all the time he was holding her hand.

Thus, under cover of the night, they crossed the ice together; and as he knelt before her ere they quitted the spot, performing again the service so delightful to a lover's heart, his lips transgressed again. No one saw; she only felt; they both alone knew.

And this was at the very moment that dear excellent Mrs Tufnell felt it to be nothing short of a sin and a shame that they should have all enjoyed themselves so much when that poor dear had been done out of it all!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A BAD HYPOCRITE.

" 'Tis not my talent to conceal my thoughts,
 Or carry smiles and sunshine in my face
 When discontent sits heavy at my heart."

—ADDISON.

"WHAT am I think—what am I to think?"

Lady Matilda had dismissed her maid, and was musing over her fire ere she went to bed upon the Christmas Eve whereof so much has already been narrated.

"What am I to think?" was the refrain of all her puzzled, happy, foolish thoughts. In reality she imagined she knew very well what to think; but somehow it pleased her to be perplexed and discomposed, and affectedly vexed, and secretly more charmed with Chalonier than ever. Bold, heartless, presuming

man—craven caitiff—to dare so much, to stop so short; villain—coward—by turns she flouted him for this, by turns for that: in very truth she had never thought aught became him better than those extremes of presumption and modesty, those alternations betwixt forwardness and backsliding. She had heard his breathing short and thick, had caught the broken whisper, marked the catch in the throat, and felt the clasp of the hand. She had seen the revulsion, the struggle, the resolution growing apace; and then what the humility of the man doubtless termed the hold regained over his runaway passions, but which she, so superior in her knowledge of all, and contempt of all, scouted as the unwelcome and unnecessary and tiresome and provoking voice of an inward mentor, who ought by this time to have had his mouth stopped.

“Really I can show him no more plainly than I do,” mused she, half sighing, half smiling; “really, my dear Mr Challoner, it is very pretty to see you look so lugubrious, and very

touching and pathetic to hear your voice tremble and shake, and to watch you force down your throat again the kind words and accents that *will* come up when poor Matilda is by. He is in love—I'd stake every womanly power I have, the man is in love. He does all that he can do, he says all that he can say, short of *the* thing, the one thing. Opportunities? He has had hosts of opportunities; he has opportunities at every turn; this whole evening was one long opportunity. Were we not together, always together, often alone together? He never left me for above a few minutes at a time, and then only when I sent him. I sent him for the pleasure of seeing him return. I could not discover so obscure a nook to fly to, but what he would track me instantly and follow; I could not be tired but he would rest too. And then he held my hand, and kissed it twice. Yes, he kissed it just here, and held the place afterwards. What right had he to hold it and yet not a word, not a single word? Oh," with a burst,

“I like his silence—I love his silence. His silence is more, a thousand times more to me than any other man’s speech. He shall be silent, silent as the grave, silent for evermore, if so he pleases, once he has spoken out. Poor man,” mocking, “poor—dear—*blind* man. Matilda is too good for you, is she? Too beautiful, too rich, too highly born? Oh dear, yes, she is all that, we know very well; but stop a little, my friend, you will find she is too *clever* also. You are not clever, Mr Challoner—not particularly clever, at least; and certainly you are not beautiful, and probably you are not rich. I wonder what you are, or why I—— Pshaw! you *shall* speak, sir; I say you shall. You have no right now to hold your tongue, and hang your head, and put your finger in your mouth like a baby. Baby? It is I that am the baby to let him play with me thus. He sees, he knows his power, and abuses it. He shall not, he shall not,” excitedly. “I—oh, if I can but preserve this bold heart when I am with him, if I can

*

but keep a merry heart and tongue, and cheat him with my face. Let me see,—can it be that I have been too soft and yielding? Perhaps I have. Then how remedy the damage? Coquet with another? But there is no one else to coquet with except Robert, and one might as well dance round a tombstone. No, no; no coquetting. No; I must be all in all to myself and by myself. I will amuse myself, be good friends with myself, and have no need of any one but myself. I will send the gentlemen about their business. It will be fit for them to go out of doors to-morrow; but it shall be too cold, or too wet, or too early, or too late, or too anything, for me. They will have to excuse me. Then I will—shall I have a headache? But a headache of that kind is missyish and vulgar; headache is unbecoming, too, and troublesome to manage. So I will be just myself—myself as I am when this wicked Jem Challoner is not by; a much better self in reality than the self that appears for him,—a silly subdued shadow of the real Matilda.

What can he see in her to fancy, I wonder? But these mild soft-eyed impostors, these abominable hypocritical make-believes of men, one never knows what they do *not* see. Well, Mr Challoner, you have done so well that you deserve to do better still; and so, to bed, Matilda, my dear," gaily saluting the mirror as she passed. "Good night, my poor, little, ill-used, tormented, tantalised Matilda,—enter to-morrow morning, *Her Ladyship*."

And accordingly her ladyship drew up her long neck like a swan when she received Mr Challoner's morning greeting, received it gently and gracefully as usual, including all in her Christmas greeting and good-wishes; but the guest, who was himself rather pale, since even the cold night air and late exercise had failed to procure him more than a short portion of hurried feverish sleep, Challoner noticed that she did not meet his eager eye, and answered but lightly his earnest inquiries.

She was almost as much occupied about the non-arrival of the post-boy as he was, and

surely with not half so good a cause. The news from the outer world could mean nothing to her, wrapped as she was and must be in the one thought; but for him it was different,—his was fear, and fear he must. He breathed again when it was made known that the mails had been delayed, and no one could say when they might arrive: a heavy snowstorm had set in in the north.

Then Teddy proposed the ice again, but Matilda excused herself on the plea of fatigue; and though she resisted, on the same ground, the allurements of the billiard-room, the insensate one for whom the whole ridiculous little pretence was got up, saw nothing amiss; it was not to be expected that she should be at their beck and call (as Teddy seemed to expect), and he had the whole day before him. Off he went to the kennels with the brothers for the morning cigar; and Lady Matilda, looking after them, felt that she had done nothing, that she never could do anything steadily and resolutely against Challoner. She

laughed at herself, and longed for a chance of undoing the little she had attempted.

It came after a time: an hour or two later the billiard-balls were heard going, and the post came in.

“Oh, Teddy, what do you think?” cried Matilda, entering the billiard-room with an open letter in her hand. “The bag has just come; there is nothing for you, Mr Challoner,”—in parenthesis. “What do you think, Teddy? This is from Marion Appleby” (Challoner, whose stroke it was, lifted his cue, and took position; naturally Marion Appleby’s note could not concern him); “she has just heard from the people Juliet is with;—you know I told you Juliet was still away, and you would not believe me——”

——“Well?” said Teddy, watching his opponent’s deliberate aim, and on this account only half interested even in his dear Applebys, —“well? What about Juliet?”

“Oh, poor Juliet, I am so sorry for her! they have only just heard, and sent this note

to tell us. Poor Juliet has taken small-pox."

The cue slid along Challoner's finger, and a brilliant winning hazard was followed by an almost impossible cannon.

"Bravo!" cried Lady Matilda, looking round with a smile. "Bravo!" And then she whispered to herself that the very sound of her voice sent the blood to her lover's cheek and the light to his eye. He did not seek a fresh position, nor follow up the run; he left his place and came towards her, as though drawn by a magnet: and when she asked why he did not go on, laughed and had no answer.

Teddy, however, was full of the Applebys again. He wanted to know everything, to see the note, to hear what was going to be done, who was going to nurse the sufferer? Whereat Challoner turned away again, for he had not thought of that.

"We must call and inquire," wound up young Lessingham, profoundly.

"I can write, which will be better," corrected his sister. "I shall send a note of sympathy at once."

"Ay, very well; send a note if you like. But we must call and inquire, all the same. We must call this afternoon."

"And inquire—for whom?"

"For Juliet, of course."

"But they can know nothing more yet. We know as much as they do at present. There has only been a telegram——"

"And surely a telegram is enough? I do wonder at you, Matilda; you never think of things unless I remind you. You would let poor Juliet be as ill as she could be without ever calling to inquire, just because the news came by telegram. I suppose it is all because you don't want to go."

"I do not want to go, certainly; but," relenting, "but, my dear Ted, I will go, if you wish it. We will all go. We can walk over after luncheon. Will you come, Mr Challoner? Unless, indeed, you would prefer—— Of

course, Overton never makes afternoon calls, so do not feel yourself the least obliged."

"Not at all. I do not feel in the least *obliged*."

"And you will just please yourself?"

"And I shall—just please myself."

She understood: and the glance he received was so arch, so sweet, so apprehensive, that the speaker threw down his cue, with "I am for Matilda, for Matilda before all the world," blazoned unmistakably in his eye and on his brow. She turned to depart.

"Aren't you going on?" cried poor Teddy, who saw himself about to be left without an antagonist.

"My dear fellow, your sister wants me," drawled his friend over his shoulder. "She told me to 'please myself,' and this is how I 'please myself,'" aside to her. "We are going to have some music, aren't we? Give you your revenge before dinner, Ted," following Matilda from the room. "Don't think you were going to win, my dear boy."

“You have the devil’s own luck in everything, I do believe,” was the rejoinder, but it was spoken to empty walls. Teddy was alone, he was deserted ; for the first time in his life he felt angry with Challoner, and that anger was not without fruits in the evil day to come.

CHAPTER XXIX.

HOPE AGAIN.

“ Hope, without action, is a barren undoer.”

—FELTHAM.

“ And all my days are trances,
And all my nightly dreams
Are where thy dark eye glances,
And where thy footstep gleams.”

—E. A. POE.

WE left poor Teddy Lessingham disconsolately knocking about the billiard-balls, in full possession of which he had been left by the desertion of the faithless Challoner; and heartily did he wish, as many another has wished before him, that the damaging strokes and brilliant runs which came so easy when no one was by, and when no game was on, would sometimes fall to his lot when they could be of any real value. He never could make head

against an enemy—he could always win by himself. Just now, when his mind was full of Challoner and Matilda, and, moreover, of poor sick Juliet Appleby, he played like one possessed by the very genius of the game; he really wondered at himself; and insensibly grew colloquial and profound, as Teddy always did when under a soothing influence.

“Well, now, they will take it very civil of us to go over to the Applebys’ this afternoon—they will think it quite the right thing; and if only Matilda and I could have gone alone—but I suppose we could hardly do that. Anyway, I shall take the flower out of my button-hole”—he had put in a Christmas rose—“it would not look at all correct to be calling to inquire after poor Juliet with a flower in my button-hole. Challoner may keep his in—I daresay he will. Let him—the Applebys are nothing to him; it was all very fine his looking so concerned and all that just now; he put it on to please Matilda—and, of course, he is quite right to please Matilda—but he

can't take *me* in. Too sharp for that dodge, *I* am. Well, now, I am glad I thought about calling, anyway; and I must take care that they know it was I who thought of it. I wish there was something else I could do. I must ask Mrs Appleby or Marion if there is not anything. Marion will put me up to it if there is. Matilda is no good on an occasion of this sort: she is flighty—that's why. There," having succeeded at last in extracting the rose—"there, Matilda would never have thought of that. I do believe now that if Robert were to die, she would go to inquire for him with a whole peacock's tail waving from her hat. Unless I caught her, that is the very thing she would go and do."

At luncheon he was full of the same reflections, and ready to communicate such as he deemed fit. "I hope the Applebys will be in," he said, taking jelly with his venison.

"You are going to the Applebys'?" said Overton. "Oh! it will snow, you know."

"So I have thought all the morning," Chal-

loner agreed with him. "Lady Matilda thinks otherwise; she has made up her mind to have another night on the ice."

"There will be no skating to-night, or I am mistaken," replied Lord Overton, who was a student of weather. "I have had my walk; I went out early, to make sure; but if you are only going as far as the Applebys', a little snow will not matter. Are you going to invite them here, or anything?"

"Invite them here! Good gracious! have you not heard—not heard about poor Juliet?" gasped Teddy.

—"Eh? About Juliet? Oh yes, poor Juliet. I am very sorry," said his brother. "Bread, please," to the footman.

"'Pon my word, you take it coolly," rejoined Teddy, now really aggrieved. "How would you like to have small-pox yourself, I wonder? Small-pox! just fancy! It is about the beastliest thing anybody can have, and I don't suppose you are even going to inquire, or—or anything," looking down at his un-

adorned coat ; “neither you nor Challoner care a bit,” resentfully.

“Dear Teddy, it will do if we take Overton’s card,” put in Lady Matilda, a shade of anxiety in her tone and look, for she knew how rapidly the horizon might be overcast were an impending storm not averted at the outset. “We can take Overton’s card; he never does call anywhere, you know.”

“Take my card, by all means, if you can find one,” said Overton ; “I wonder where they are? I have not seen any since——”

“My dear man, I have them ; Mr Challoner will think us dreadful barbarians,” cried Matilda, laughing to their guest ; “we really have not much manners among us, Mr Challoner——”

——“What on earth do you mean?” burst forth Teddy in his angriest voice.

“I am afraid he is not going to be good,” said Matilda, following Overton apart presently. “I am rather afraid of Teddy to-day. It is the reaction after last night ; you know

how little he can stand, and anything the least out of his usual way always tells upon him. He did too much last night, and was over-excited and over-heated; to-day he is feeling out of sorts in consequence. Poor dear boy! I do hope, I do trust," apprehensively—"Overton, what *shall* we do if he has one of his bad turns now? It would be so very, so particularly unfortunate."

"I think," replied he quietly, "you had better not take him with you this afternoon."

"Not take him to the Applebys'! My dear Overton, it was he who proposed going. It is his own especial expedition. Nothing would induce him to stay behind."

"Then you had better leave Challoner."

She was silent.

"I really mean it," said Overton.

"But—I don't understand."

"Yes; I think you do. Now, take my advice; leave behind one or the other. If Teddy will not stay, make Challoner."

"And suppose he won't be made?"

“Then you must stay yourself.”

That, however, was not to be borne. The walk was just what she wanted, and just what she knew Challoner wanted; and whatever Overton might hint about Teddy's jealousy—she supposed that was what he meant—well, surely she could manage her own Teddy. She had done so hitherto with consummate success. Only on one occasion during Challoner's first visit had any ill feeling ever broken out in public, though none knew better than herself how often ~~it~~ ^{she} had had to be charmed away in private, and how many fond words, attentions, and consolations had gone to keeping her poor boy in that mind towards his friend, which made him still think Matilda's lover the best of fellows and good companions. That a mood was now imminent, and that it would require care, tact, and patience on her part to avert it, was plain; but, alas! Teddy was now no longer the first. For his sake she knew she ought to have stayed at home. She ought

not, for any pleasure of her own, to have run the risk of rousing further his already disturbed emotions and suspicions; but Challoner wished her to go—and she went.

Overton came to the door to see the party start. He showed no displeasure at having had his advice disregarded; indeed he felt none. In the depths of his heart he was strangely touched and moved by this very disobedience and pertinacity on the part of one who usually was only too ready to fall in with his slightest suggestion directly anything was wrong with their common charge; and there was an almost visible tenderness and wistfulness in his look and voice, as he stepped forward to his sister's side and saw how the other side was claimed. Was there anything he could do for her?—any way in which he could help her?

“Take care of her, Challoner; take care of her,” he said again and again, and involuntarily his hand pressed Matilda's arm as he spoke; then, as if afraid of having betrayed his inward thoughts by such earnestness, “I do not like

the look of the day. The clouds are banking up in the north. There will be a heavy snow-storm before long, and the snow will lie when it falls."

"Ha!" cried Challoner, exultation in his tone. "Snow, do you say? Three feet of snow round Overton Hall! I, for one, wish for no better luck." He was in spirits so gay, and monopolised the conversation so entirely, that the ill-fated third person, to whom neither query nor response was made, and who would not laugh at jests with which he had nothing to do, found fresh fault with his companions and their society at every step. What an abominable afternoon it had turned out! How infernally dark the sky was! What a devil of a state the roads were in! Well knowing what such language meant, and why expressions were thus made use of, which she had long ago forbidden, and which had in consequence dropped out of Teddy's vocabulary, and were never heard except as birds of evil omen, Matilda could but turn a deaf ear and give

herself more and more to Challoner as the walk went on. It was no time to speak to Teddy now ; not by the gentlest whisper durst she risk an outbreak, and she would not, even to herself, allow that she had been to blame in bringing about the situation. No, she had *not* been to blame ; a brother must sometimes go to the wall ; she had but few pleasures, and this—this was more than any mere passing enjoyment ; it meant—who could say what it might not mean ? Challoner had asked her to go, and at such a time she could not afford to refuse his slightest request, nor seem to disregard anything that was to him a subject for hope or fear. Was he not already enough troubled with misgivings ? She read *that* in his eye and voice, which made every trifle of importance ; the anxiety he could not hide, the agitation, the tremor, the one thought of his breast, which was at length become too dominant for any effort to conceal it, all wrought in her a kindred emotion, and an indifference to aught beside what passed between them two.

And this indifference was dreadful to poor Teddy, dimly as he might perceive it. He felt that something was wrong; he was, as Matilda had said, out of sorts, the reaction from two days' severe exercise and turbulent jollity; and what he would now have liked to have done more than anything would have been to have taken himself off then and there, and left the all-engrossed pair to themselves for the rest of the way. Nothing but the difficulty of presenting himself at the Applebys' door all alone—he who never went anywhere alone—prevented this: that staggered him; no, he could not do that.

Yet how he wished he could. To see Challoner walking backwards over every inch of frozen puddle in order to hold both Matilda's hands and guide her steps—to see him taking out his pocket-handkerchief to wipe every stile she had to cross, lest even the skirts of her dress should be touched by the powder of frost which lay crisp on the top bar, it was too ridiculous,—Matilda, who did not

care where she went, nor what a state her petticoats were in when she was out alone with him on a wintry scramble like this. He wished Challoner had only beheld her when she came home from Endhill, two days before.

“Pooh! what is all the fuss about?” he protested crossly, being indeed driven to his wits’ end, when a slippery ditch being in the way—a ditch that he knew Matilda could have cleared like a deer had she chosen—she must needs be drawn delicately across with many a little cry of alarm and need of encouragement and support at every step. And he had himself her muff given him to hold, and must perforce stand by with his disgusted face, quite unobserved and uncommented upon, while all this went on!

“It’s a deuced pity you came,” he averred at length, looking the helpless lady straight in the face; and as the colour rose in her cheek, he knew he had hurt her at last.

That was something, but unhappily it did

not do all that it was intended; it might silence for the moment, it might cast a passing shadow, but Challoner with a lover's sympathy was soon able by a lover's wiles to soften every blow that had not been of his own giving, and all went on as before. Poor Teddy, he was very powerless; he tried to make himself disagreeable, and no one found it out; he would fain have made himself scarce, but that would have been cutting his own throat. As it was, however, he bounced out of sight whenever and wherever he could; now running across a field wherein was a pond whose ice might be superior to their own; now taking a turn round by a farm to have a word with the farmer whom he espied in the background; now hailing a labourer going past with a waggon,—anything and everything to force himself into notice, and be, if only in tormenting, of consequence. What was it to him that Matilda had to wait on the bleakest point of the common while he explored a rat-hole, and why should he care

whether she "thought she had lost him" or not, when he disappeared for so long behind Luke Hayfield's farm-buildings? She would be willing enough to "lose" him; and if it were not for the Applebys—and the poor fellow's heart swelled within him.

Once within the Applebys' door, however, there was an improvement: here he was on his own ground, here he was always made much of; and after the privations of the way, it was something to be still some one anywhere.

He had fallen from his high estate with Matilda; was it not only too probable that he had fallen for evermore? If it had only been a temporary thing, a piece of womanish nonsense, Matilda had now and again been ridiculous before, but she had always come quickly and gladly back to her Teddy, laughing at herself, and making merry at her own expense; but now—now,—and he shook his head angrily and miserably. How easy it had been to say, "You must marry again," when

no marrying again seemed ever likely to come to pass; but how detestable and ominous sounded his own advice in his own ears now! His heart was sore, and had been sore for exactly four hours,—ever since twelve o'clock, in short, when he and billiards had been thrown over for love and Matilda; that had opened his eyes at last, and the only wonder was, as every one will perceive, that they had not been opened long before.

In Mrs Appleby's drawing-room, however, the young visitor was urbanity itself. "I can't tell you how sorry we were," he said: "it took us quite by surprise; I assure you it did—quite by surprise. We had no idea of such a thing; and when Marion's note came in, Matilda was so astonished — you can't think how astonished she was. We wondered what it was about, you know; and then we said—I said, we must come and inquire at once."

"So kind," replied Mrs Appleby, a faded

prototype of what Juliet would certainly become. "Lady Matilda is always so kind. Directly the sad news came, we sent to let her know, because we felt so sure——"

——"Mr Challoner has just come from Clinkton," said Lady Matilda, sympathetically; "he only came yesterday."

"Indeed! From Clinkton? And did you see my daughter, sir?" turning to him. "She was often in the town, I believe, though our friends, the Windlasses, with whom she is staying—and where she has been taken ill, poor child—live four or five miles out in the country."

"I saw Miss Appleby once or twice, but she did not see me," replied he. "Clinkton is a large place, and," he drew near to Mrs Appleby, as Lady Matilda stepped aside with Marion, "we were in different circles. She did not mention me, I suppose?"

"Not that I remember. Marion," but Marion did not hear.

“What a view you have from this window!” cried Challoner, “what an extent of country!——”

——“Very pretty; but,” said Mrs Appleby, possessed of but one idea for the time——“but you were speaking of Clinkton. Do you know Clinkton well? Do you know the Windlasses? Had you heard about the fancy ball?”

Had he not? He had heard of little else.

“Well, she had been going to that,” proceeded his hostess, reading an affirmative in his face, “and a very smart ball it was, I fancy,” with the usual habit of making the most of anything at a distance; “a very smart ball, and my poor Juliet would have much enjoyed it. But only yesterday,—and the ball was last night, you know——”

——“Did she go?” demanded Challoner, suddenly.

“Dear me! no, Mr Challoner; how could

she go when she was lying ill of the small-pox? She was taken ill only a few hours before, though I daresay we shall hear presently, when the post comes in, that——”

“How very unlucky!” He was listening with all ears to Lady Matilda now, and Mrs Appleby lost him from that moment.

“You will not surely go yourself?” Lady Matilda was saying.

“I shall indeed,—at least I should, if only mamma would allow me. But she will not. Neither she nor papa will hear of it.”

“And they are quite right, Marion.” And then followed reason and argument, encouragement and consolation.

“And now you will just stay with a quiet mind,” concluded Matilda, rising. “Promise that you will, dear.”

(“With a quiet mind, or not,” said Chaloner, sardonically to himself. “I do not insist on that adjunct at all, my dear Miss Appleby. Only be good enough to stay, and

I leave it entirely to you to regulate the quietude of your mind.")

He had learned all he wanted to know, and nothing had been said that he did not wish to hear. Now he did not care how soon the visit came to a close. Juliet powerless, her family ignorant, Marion prevented going, the Windlasses prevented telling, — he could scarcely believe his own ears, as one thing after another dropped out, as if to strengthen his temptation, and make him more and more secure on the edge of his precipice; for so entirely had his fears of late centred on the Appleby family, or, at least, on one member of it, that, thus unexpectedly relieved, it almost seemed as if he could be assailed from no other quarter. Oh, something might, could, should yet be dared and done! Hope was again desperately rearing its unabashed front.

"Mr Challoner, you have been standing in that cold corner for ever so long," said Mrs Appleby's languid voice from the sofa. "Do

come nearer the fire ; do, Marion, dear, poke up the fire. Oh, thank you," to Teddy, who seized the poker. "So good of you all to come out in such weather."

"The most glorious weather, my dear Mrs Appleby. I wish you had been with us last night," cried Matilda, coming forward ; and as she did so, and then seated herself at the invalid's feet, for the few civilities preparatory to departure, her brother seized his opportunity.

"Marion—I say, Marion, I wish you would tell me if there is anything I can do," said he, drawing her aside confidentially. "Can't I do *anything*? Are you going to Clinkton? Let me go to Clinkton with you ; I'll go any time like a shot. Now, mind, you ask me if you want me. You need not say anything to any of them, just send word to me," and he shook her hand a dozen times. (If Challoner had only heard him !)

But Challoner's attention was concentrated

on Matilda, and *her* parting; and having at length got her safely out of the house, he was now only bent on making the most of his fresh reprieve.

“Good-bye; I’m off to Seaborough. I have a telegram to take for Marion,” announced Teddy, triumphantly. “She has intrusted it to me, and I have promised to go and send it off myself,” — his tone intimating, “Other people think much of me, if you do not.”

“Don’t be astonished if I am late,” he added, having invariably found that this was what Matilda minded more than anything.

Ah! Matilda hardly noticed it now.

The prophesied snow, though it fell fast and thick after the light went, did not set in soon enough to hinder any one from walking as swiftly as he or she chose before then; nevertheless, when Lord Overton overtook his sister and Challoner within the park, having gone out again himself as the sky kept up, it was not soon after they had parted from their

other companion ; an hour or more had elapsed. They had not hurried ; they had not come quite straight home. There had been time for anything, and yet there was nothing to tell.

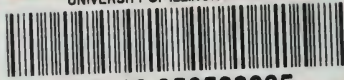
“This is rather curious,” said Overton to himself.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

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